

The BANKS OF COLNE



EDEN PHILLPOTTS

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THE BANKS OF COLNE

(*THE NURSERY*)

BY
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"OLD DELABOLE," ETC.

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THE BANKS OF COLNE

CHAPTER I

AT HYTHE

DOWN the street that falls from Colchester to Hythe, on an evening in high summer, there walked a young woman.

None accosted her, for none knew her. A man or two turned a second glance upon her, because she was fair to see and her widow's weeds made a striking frame for the picture of her corn-coloured hair, grey eyes, and beautiful mouth; but she was a stranger, and, as she strolled down Hythe Hill, she reflected that not a soul of all the thousands circling round about her had ever seen her face or heard her name. The thought cheered her rather than cast her down. Resolution and humour both homed in her expression; her almond-shaped eyes were keen, her mouth was wide awake. The lips moved and tightened sometimes. She looked about her and marked everything; occasionally she lifted her hands to shut in a picture, or half closed her eyes to get the colour values of a scene, as artists will. She wore little crape, yet contrived to make it clear that she was a widow, newly made. Her interest in the scene about her was fitful, for between moments of attention to the life and bustle of the quays on Colne river-side, the woman retreated into herself. But outward forms of things — their lines and colours and movements — continually attracted her eyes and distracted her thoughts.

She felt a desire to hear human speech and asked questions of men at their work. Great warehouses thrust up

on either side of the narrowed mouth of Colne estuary. They hung their cranes over the water, and beneath them the little merchant coasters and small tramp steamers lay, to give, or receive. Great Thames barges were here and other less splendid craft. They brought coals and timber and grain, and bore away oil and oil-cake, ironwork, and the varied merchandise of Colchester.

There was a barge with open hatches unloading Indian corn, and the wanderer found herself much attracted by the great masses of red-golden seed. Men bore it away, and one stood below knee-deep in the bright corn and scooped it into the sacks of the stevedores. They came and went sure-footed along bending planks, and transferred the cargo to a granary, whose open door gaped for them on the other side of the street. The girl, for she was not much more, found great pleasure in this spectacle and made a mental picture.

Presently she turned away and followed a path that led south over meadow-land beside the widening river. The fields were spattered with dark-coloured kine, and beyond them, to the east, a low hill rose, heavily wooded. A railway ran below it — the line to Wyvenhoe and Brightlingsea. Looking back, the painter saw how pleasantly the masts of the ships spired together among the houses. Long shadows fell now, but above them the spars flashed up into the sunshine, and little pennons fluttering at their peaks twinkled, like red and blue stars.

The visitor found a stile in the fields and sat down on the topmost bar. She was tall, but now she drew up her legs, rested her elbows on her knees and remained in this somewhat cramped position with thought in her eyes. Her lips moved to the tune in her mind. Sometimes they flickered with a fleeting smile; but that was seldom. For the most part her expression ranged over more serious emotions. Actual sorrow found no home there. Passion once lit her eyes; her mouth set and her teeth flashed whitely. But the anger vanished in an expiration and

she grew mild again. Underlying all the play of light and darkness revealed in her features, there dwelt determination. Little hair lines were already woven by the spiders of thought and care upon her forehead; but her face was imperious as well as beautiful, and under repose it showed will and nerve.

A fellow-creature came to the stile — one who seemed less at pains to practise self-control. She was a girl of eighteen or nineteen, clad in a plain homespun dress and a black straw hat with a white ribbon. She wore no gloves and carried nothing. She stared in front of her on the ground with her head bent over her bosom. She was slim and only blessed with the beauty of youth. She looked haggard and her gait appeared unsteady. The stranger alighted from the stile to let her pass, and, climbing over without thanks, she went forward toward Hythe.

The elder's eyes followed her with interest until the girl had vanished; then she returned to her thoughts for another hour. Presently she looked at her watch, saw that it was past eight o'clock, and began to walk back by the way she had come. Instead of crossing the bridge at Hythe, however, she followed the dwindling creek with purpose to reach her destination by the river. For the valley invited her and the sun, that had set behind a mist of distant trees, made beauty there. But clouds swallowed it quickly and night soon fell. She was now in a region somewhat lonely at this hour, for the workpeople had all gone and the river-side was deserted. Presently she felt doubtful of her way and desired the appearance of a fellow-creature to guide her. But none came. The light died fast and for a moment the artist stood irresolute on rough and broken ground by the river. At water's edge a barge was building and its naked ribs rose over her head and made a pattern against the sky. The stern of the barge stood not much above the river where, oily, sluggish, silent, it rounded in a backwater. Colne thrust out a muddy finger here, that narrowed through a channel into the fields be-

hind, and the woman was hesitating whether to turn back, when she saw something move between the stem of the growing barge and the water. At first she thought it was a dog; then she saw it was a human being. An accident of movement revealed her. She was a girl — the same girl who had passed over the stile two hours before.

So the two met again, and the stranger welcomed the native.

“For goodness’ sake tell me how to get out of this hole,” she said. “I’m utterly lost.”

For a moment no answer came; then the crouching girl spoke in the accents of one suddenly wakened from sleep.

“You can’t go that way, and you won’t find the path if you’re new to it. Best go back to the bridge.”

“But I’m not sure of the way behind me now. And you? Aren’t you going somewhere?”

“Yes, I am,” said the dreary voice.

“Are you waiting for somebody?”

“No.”

There was a pause and the elder’s memory quickened.

“Forgive me, but you passed me in the fields at a stile, didn’t you?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t sound happy.”

“Who is? You’d best to go away and look after yourself.”

“That’s what I’m doing. There’s nobody else to look after me but myself. Perhaps it’s better luck to look after yourself than depend upon other people.”

“If your life’s worth living — not if it isn’t.”

“Of course it’s worth living. Isn’t yours? Such a young thing as you, with your life all in front of you.”

“My life’s all behind me for that matter.”

“Well, come up out of that mud and talk to me. You’re lonely and I’m lonely; and you know the way out of this dead hole and I don’t.”

The girl did not move or reply, so the speaker ap-

proached her. She was sitting on a plank with her feet dangling over the water a yard beneath. Upon it floated dim, amorphous washes of tar, stained to brightness by the last light of the western sky.

"What a horrid place to choose!"

"As good as any other."

The stranger put her hand on the girl's shoulder. She had divined the situation.

"To think," she said, "that I should come to another girl at a minute like this. You poor, little, forlorn dear! But I wonder if you are as poor and forlorn as I am?"

She saw the expression on the face of the unhappy one and stooped down and kissed her. The caress unsealed a torrent of tears.

"Go away and let me alone," sobbed the girl; but irresolution was in her voice and the elder found her task easy enough.

"Get up and come away from this evil water and talk to me. Nothing happens by chance, you know. It wasn't meant you should. It's seldom worth while — never from anything outside. If a girl's sick inside, perhaps — but not for anything outside."

A sort of wonder came into the face of the sufferer.

"I swear to God I'd have done it," she said.

"I don't doubt your pluck — only your sense. Tell me about it. But come away from the water first."

In her heart the elder found a shadow of a smile.

But she spoke seriously and pretended more than she felt. The girl was a slight thing for all her grief, and doubtless the grief was exaggerated. The stranger woman assumed a sterner vein, raised up the girl, then linked an arm in hers and led her from the water.

"What's your name?" she asked, but the other did not reply. She took out a pocket-handkerchief and dried her tears. For a time she walked in front and turned her way up the valley. The beady light of a gas lamp twinkled far off, and neither spoke until they reached it. It

stood beneath a hedge, and beyond was a gate that opened to a road. Then the girl turned on the woman.

"You've lost a husband by the look of it — and I've lost him that was going to be my husband. You've kept me alive to-night. But what was the sense of doing that?"

"Were you betrothed to him?"

"No; but he meant it all right. Then he had bad luck and forgot all about me. As if bad luck mattered to me. He loved me, and then bad luck stopped him and he stopped loving me. And what worse can happen than that?"

"Plenty of things. I suppose you're making all this fuss because you're going to have a baby?"

"Oh, no, I'm not. He's not that sort. More am I. He's a gentleman, and a very clever man. We're superior people. I'm a clerk. He was going to ask me to marry him when he came home. I knew it without his telling me. There was a lot understood and not spoken between us. Everybody knew it was like that. Then he went; and when he did come home without any luck, he dropped me."

"Why didn't you tackle him and tell him his luck made no difference to your feelings?"

"It was for him to ask me if it did. Besides, we'd never talked about feelings."

"Perhaps you thought he meant more than he did?"

"I'm too clever for that. I know exactly what he meant."

"I'm sure you're clever. I dare say it will all go right yet. If he's had a hard knock, it may take him time to get over it. Men are different from us. All sorts of silly little things throw their love-making out of gear. Perhaps he's proud?"

"Yes, he is."

"Then, of course, if he's not in a position to go on with it ——"

"What do things like that matter to a girl who loves him?"

"It's what they matter to him—not you. With women love's stronger than pride; with men it isn't. If he's brave and clever, he'll get right again, and then—— Have you got friends?"

"Yes, I have."

"That's something. I haven't got a friend in the world."

"What! With a beautiful face like that? But perhaps you don't want them now your husband's dead."

"I want them badly enough."

"Poor?"

"Ever so poor."

The girl thought for a moment.

"I'll be your friend," she said. "I must be, come to think of it, whether you want me for a friend or not. I'd be dead flesh now but for you."

"What's your name?"

"You won't tell about this? You never would whisper it to man or woman, would you?"

"Need you ask another woman that? I've thought of it, too, for that matter."

"It's lovely things like you they do find drowned," said the girl, "not homely creatures like me."

"You're pretty when you're happy, I expect. Everybody's pretty when they're happy."

"There's a gentleman I know has got a death mask of a French girl that was drowned," continued the native. "An artist, going into the Morgue, found her and thought it wasn't good such loveliness should be lost. So they made a mask of her face before it was gone. You can see the matted eyelashes on her little cheek. Made to love, not to drown, that girl."

"Drowning often follows loving. I know the mask. I've copied it when I was learning to draw."

There fell a silence, then the girl spoke suddenly:

"My name's Margery Mahew, and I'm a clerk at Ambrose's gardens. And who might you be?"

"My name's Aveline Brown, and I'm stopping in Station Road. I'm an artist, and I shall find plenty of beautiful pictures here. D'you think I shall find anybody to buy them?"

"I hope so. I don't know."

They trudged along for some time without speaking. Then Margery explained the road.

"The Park is up to our left now, and we shall come out by the bridge presently. That's the mill on the other side of the river."

"It looks beautiful even in the dark."

"I live at Mile End, the other side of the railway. So I can show you home to Station Road as I go."

"Do they expect you at home?"

"Yes — some time. I go and come. I live with my uncle — a gardener at Ambrose's. I keep house for him."

"Come to my lodgings and have some supper with me," suggested Mrs. Brown. "It's nice to know one person here. You say you'll be my friend. Come and calm down, and tell me about Colchester."

"D'you mean it?"

"Yes, do come."

"This has been an unreal sort of day for me," murmured the girl. "I feel as if I was dreaming."

"I know just how you feel. We all have dream days like that. Come and eat some bread and cheese and biscuits with me, and wake up before you go home."

"You've done a big thing, I suppose," answered Margery, but her voice was heavy and grudging.

"It's you who've done the big thing. Forget the nightmare part of the dream, and forget yourself by being kind to me. Life's going to be all right for you. I know it — something tells me so. I never make a mistake about people."

The other showed a spark of perception.

"I don't know so much about that. You wouldn't have no friends in the world, a lovely piece like you, if you never made mistakes about people," she said.

The widow laughed rather mournfully.

"Perhaps it's because people make mistakes about me," she answered.

For some time neither spoke again. They ascended from Colne at the bridge below North Street, turned to the right and proceeded to the station.

"To think what a day may bring forth," said the girl suddenly.

"Are you coming to supper with me?"

"I'll come if you aren't ashamed of me."

"And who am I to be ashamed of anybody? And you're going to be my friend, remember. You don't know half that means to me."

They reached Station Road and entered a little house together.

CHAPTER II

THE WATER GARDEN

AVELINE walked early next morning along the river-side, to see in daylight what she had passed by with Margery on the previous night. Everything was strange and interesting and beautiful. She longed to begin painting at once. Under the bat willows, that rose in an avenue beside the water, morning light flashed on the stream, and the arrowy foliage of the trees sparkled and twinkled. Other willows flourished on the opposite bank of Colne, and swans swam upon the river, where it broadened into a reach bright with sunshine above the mill pool.

The artist's purpose was to find a picture and study it under early light.

Now she found what she wanted, and, stepping backwards, nearly trod upon a man. He was lying on a sack in the grass, and by him, upon a big canvas bag, there sat a woman. They had been watching Aveline's actions and speculating upon them. Both man and woman were somewhat extraordinary figures, and both smoked pipes. The woman bore the marks of beauty in ruins. She might have been forty-five, and was tanned a brick red by exposure. Her eyes were bright and of the darkest brown; on her head she wore a bedraggled hat, with one great turkey feather set bolt upright upon it; her hair was cut short and her thin bosom was buttoned up in an old Norfolk jacket. Her dress, of withered brown, ended in a fringe of rags; but her boots were new and sound. Her companion appeared rather better dressed. He had a round, unhealthy face, with a thin beard and moustache. His eyes were dim and bleared.

"If I'm in the way, say so," said the man, as Aveline nearly fell backwards over him. She apologised, and he laughed.

"Me and Emma was wondering what you were up to."

"I'm going to paint a picture."

"Why?" asked the man.

"I live by it."

"Can't say as I've seen you before, have you, Emma?"

"No, for certain," answered the woman.

"I'm a new-comer to Colchester."

"That accounts for it. We're very well known — famous, in fact," explained Emma.

"But our liking for fresh air and objection to what they call 'honest toil' make us people apart," drawled the man. "I'm William Ambrose, and she's Emma Darcy, better known as 'Marmalade Emma,' owing to a misunderstanding at a grocer's."

"There was three of us once," said the woman, in a deep, pleasant voice. "Me and Billy and Captain Slasher. Above all law and order, you understand, and lived together and tramped together. Well known throughout the Tendring Hundred for our fearless opinions and that. We live from day to day, and the morrow don't fright us more than it does a bird. Do it, Billy? We don't know the least mite what's going to come of us to-morrow; and we don't care."

"It was because Cap'n Slasher fell away from that, that trouble overtook him," said Billy. "We got on very well for a bit and shared everything that come along; but then he grew impatient and started making money."

"Would sing," explained Emma. "He'd walk down the middle of the street through the housen and sing for pence."

"He'd howl that dismal, cowardly hymn — you know — 'Rock of Ages cleft for me, Let me hide myself in Thee.' A mean-spirited bit of nonsense, in my opinion. Who the devil wants to hide in somebody else? A song for

slackers, I call it. And he sang it once too often, and he got it in the neck at last, yelping down St. Paul's Road. A few unknown men set on the Cap'n and left him senseless in the dark of a winter's evening."

"We were willing to take him back when he came out of orspital," continued Emma; "but goodstruth! 'Never again,' he says, 'I'm fed up with Colchester.' So he vanished away. I missed him more'n what Bill did. I nilly cried my eyes out for him. In fact, I made Billy jealous, didn't I, Bill?"

"Jealous I never was and never could be," answered Mr. Ambrose.

Aveline sat on a wooden seat close to this singular pair. They were quite willing to talk, and both smoked while they did so.

"If you're a stranger here, you'll find that we are a law-ridden and a parson-ridden town," said the man. "If I could work, which I can't, I'd try to show people that the days for all this driving and harrying and bullying are past. Under socialism there is a complete change coming, and we shall look at things and people as they really are — not as their cash makes 'em appear. The way we live now three-quarters of the people are handicapped to hell from the minute they're born, and the other quarter get the lot, on the strength of being their father's sons. Property is the idea that wrecks England. Take apples, for example."

"We take enough of them, anyway," said Emma.

"Very well then. Here's a hedge and here's an apple tree, and Nature looks after it. She don't care a damn who planted the tree, any more than she cares who planted the grass at the foot of the tree, or who planted the corn on the other side of the hedge. She looks after the tree for the community — birds and squirrels and mice, and Emma and me, included. And when we get to understand that Nature works for the community and not the individual, there's no doubt we shall begin to see light."

“But Nature does work; so why shouldn’t you?” asked Aveline.

“A mean question, and easily answered. But for the minute I’m talking about apples. Well, there’s the tree covered with the fruits of the earth — the earth, mind you — and I, that live by the fruits of the earth, hold views that make me feel I’ve as much right to the apples as the man who says there’re his, or the king on his throne for that matter. So I take them in no unreasonable and small spirit. The unreasonable man would take more than his share, with an eye to selling again, which is what I call dishonest; and the poor-spirited man would palter with them and very like only pick up the windfalls, and so quiet a bad conscience. Not so me and Emma. We’ve got no conscience, bad or otherwise. So we take, say, a dozen of the best, having first sampled a few to see the tree ain’t cheating us — for the outside is often as false in apples as in humans. Then we go on our way, at peace with God and man. If the thing’s brought home and man isn’t at peace with us, we bend to force. A blind generation has often interfered with the freedom of my body — never with the freedom of my mind.”

“He’s been locked up seven times,” said Emma.

The heart of the artist went out to these people. She had large sympathy with the egregious, and their isolation awoke hidden instincts.

“But what about work?” she asked. “I know everything’s all wrong, but why don’t you try to set it right?”

“I’ve not got the powers for preaching. I’m a living protest — so’s Marmalade Emma. Some women would be ashamed of that nickname, seeing how she came by it. But she’s not. A pot of marmalade, traced back to its foundations is just the same as an apple, or pear, or peck of corn. And when you say ‘work,’ you must remember that Nature makes us all different — some to work, some to wander, some to dream dreams. Let them that are called to work do their work. I never stood between a

man and a bit of work in my life, and never shall. The drones do their proper work, as well as the bees, and we must have variety, and respect each man's nature. Work by all means, I don't prevent it; but as I'm born to play, it's your right and duty to respect my birthright and let me play. In fact, pushed home, you ought to help me to play, not hinder me. It's every man's duty to help the destiny of every other. Take Emma's brother. He's a freeman of Brittlesea¹—a man of the sea, with his right in the oyster fisheries. A glutton for work, and engaged on the Fishery Company's steamer, *Peewit*. Well, did I ever come between him and his labours? And yet, when winter overtakes us, and Emma, who is his only relation worth being proud of, comes down on him for a room to cover us of a night till the spring returns, do you think he welcomes us gladly? Not at all. Thomas Darcy is as ignorant a man, for all I've known him ten years, as any man living. My own brother hasn't got less sense as to what the community owes the non-workers."

"Have you got a brother?" asked the listener.

Emma pointed behind them, where a black fence ran. Above it, on a white board, twenty feet long, was written in red and gold a single name —

"AUBREY PARKYN AMBROSE,
COLNESIDE GARDENS"

"That's his brother," she said. "He's the biggest nurseryman in Colchester. Worth hundreds of thousands, I dare say — and the Mayor of Colchester this year in the bargain."

"I'm the thorn in his flesh," declared the tramp. "He's offered me two hundred pounds per annum in quarterly payments, if I'll leave the country. When I see him swelling by, I say, 'But for the grace of God, there goes Billy Ambrose!' Poor soul, I could rise to pity him, if

¹ *Brittlesea* = Brightlingsea.

he wasn't such a good and model type of man. You can judge of people entirely by their attitude to my brother, Parkyn. Them that admire him are no friends of mine; but for such as hate him by natural instinct and proper feeling, there's hope."

The artist had been considering Emma's strong features and remarkable hat.

"I wonder if you'd let me paint you?" she asked, "just as you are."

"Just as I am, without one flea," said Emma, and William roared.

"You've never heard a woman make a joke like that, I'll bet?" he asked.

"I never did," confessed Aveline; "but let me paint her—here, to-morrow."

"To-morrow's an unknown quantity with me and Emma," explained Mr. Ambrose. "You'll never catch us committing ourselves to to-morrow. 'Never trust to-morrow,' is a wise saying invented by me. To-morrow we may be here, or at Brittlesea, or Mersea Island, or Jericho."

"In fact, we're like the hares and pheasants," declared Emma. "If you want us, you've got to hunt us; and because you hunt us, it don't follow by any means you'll catch us, do it, Billy?"

"We have our haunts and holts, like the natural creatures we claim to be," said William Ambrose. "However, you'll very likely see us about. We circle round Colchester, like the moon circles round the earth."

"Will you accept a little memento of our meeting, then?"

"In the same spirit as you give, we'll accept," promised Emma. "We like you, don't we, Billy?"

"Yes," said the man, "you're a lovely bit, for all your silly, black weeds; and the chap who died and had to leave you behind was unlucky. We don't thank you for this half-crown. We take it as the fair return for our

friendship, which is yours in future. Now we must get on the war-path, Emma."

"Can I walk in the gardens over there?" asked Aveline.

"Most certainly. My brother opens them to the public. I go in myself when I feel like it. Sometimes, if I want to reward one of the right sort, I go in by night and lift a valuable plant, and cover myself with glory. Mind you go and look at the larkspurs. To the understanding eye, they're a sermon. Not that flowers ever preach anything but cash to my poor brother."

"He preaches to them more like," said Emma.

"No, my beautiful girl," answered Billy. "The flowers have got nothing to learn from Parkyn Ambrose. The flowers teach: they're far above learning. To sell flowers, in my opinion, is very nearly as bad as keeping a slave market. His nursery's a prison, and I for one shall always break in and rescue a plant now and again, when I'm in the mind to do so. You see he lives by them, and yet here am I, that have forgot more about flowers than ever he knew, poor soul."

William shouldered the sack, and waved his hand to Aveline. Then he went forward with Marmalade Emma paddling in his wake; while, laughing to herself and the happier for this venture, the artist walked by the river, presently found a gate that opened into the enclosures and entered them.

The immense nurseries extended as far as she could see; but close at hand, in the lap of Colne, stretched a water garden, perhaps the fairest in all England. A great weeping willow hung over the way, and its bright tresses had been cut into an arch where the path ran under it. Now Aveline passed through this golden tunnel and stood before a lake.

The water lily ponds were spread in a place of cool green and whispering boughs. Willow folk made the dominant decoration and broke the contours of the banks with domes and canopies of grey and green. Here they

sparkled with white fire where the breezes lifted their leaves; here they fell like fountains and trailed their delicate boughs in the water. With them the fern-leaved alder sprang, and behind them towered a row of poplars, that marked the river banks beyond.

The lake itself was led with art into its appointed form. Little headlands gave upon it and offered a new picture at each turn, yet preserved the restful distinction of the whole. The fingers of the water islanded many a fine mass of riparian things, and rush and sedge, bamboo and flowering grasses were broken deftly in their masses and brightened and lightened by a thousand flowers.

First came the legions of the meadowsweets, from white to cream, from palest pink to red. With plumes and spires they nodded and swayed in their drifts along the water side; and some drooped their blossom sprays and some rose stiffly together and drove a fine, upright pattern into the graceful tangles of the grasses. The great and lesser reed-mace similarly sprang upward, and with their black velvet spears brought symmetry and strength into all the yielding lines from which they rose. Giant rhubarbs lifted their red flower-stalks half as high as the willow trees, and inflorescence still touched their branches with sparks of russet. Beneath them a thousand plume poppies feathered together above their glaucous leaves and swayed their delicate flower pannicles in a warm mist of amber light, that deepened into rose where a drift of willow-herb spread beyond. At one island salient stood a prickly rhubarb with foliage crinkled and vast, each leaf the green sky of a little world spread under it, and beside these noble plants thrived water gladiolus, with umbels of pale pink, and pickerel weed, flashing sky-blue flowers among its arrowy leaves. At hand the true arrow-leaf lifted many blossoms among its lance-shaped foliage, and the whorls of white flowers, each triple-petalled with a knot of gold, rose one above another to break the lines of a peninsula that stretched out into the water behind

them. Many fair grasses also ventured daintily into the water, and gleaming glycera and blades of sweet acorus stood forth among the shallows. Above them a New Zealand flax, its swords slashed with silver, cast a bright reflection upon the lake, and the zebra-rush lifted striped sheaves beneath it. But all this brightness was cunningly disposed to break up heavier masses of foliage and lend vitality and leaping joy to the bank side. Life twinkled starry everywhere, and the flower-light, now high, now low, ran in a rainbow over the clouds of summer green. Great plantain lilies lifted their lavender spikes above their deep-ribbed leaves and brought back a memory of the wistarias that had hung their purple over the water in spring; but the true lilies were nearly all sped, and only a leopard lily or two still opened his scarlet and ebony-spotted bells in the jungle at water side. The last of the water irises still opened patines of opal and dull crimson above their green swords; but the globe flowers and primroses were gone; the fairy lacework of the bog-bean had vanished; the white stars of American mandrakes had given place to heavy scarlet fruits, and the baneberries were clad with a blood-red harvest.

For summer days were glowing, and the sun-bright colours began to enrich each dingle with lemon and orange. Hues so vivid demanded skill for their planting and foresight for their values on the mass; but experience and understanding had ordered their mingled tones and balanced their assertive splendours. The ragwort's flame mingled with dim red burnets; the giant buttercups lifted their constellations in a setting of sombre green; the sky-blue lyme grass was ablaze with invasion of monkey flowers, orange and pink; and the yellow loosestrife massed nobly with the purple. Early meadowsweets had set a bank of rufous seed-heads that blended with other yellow blossoms, and spartina's nodding plumes and spikelets of gold fell about forget-me-nots gathered at her feet. Away

beyond, the companies of a giant groundsel sprang like fire against a verdurous bank and lighted the darkness of many a shady nook. Eight feet high they towered to fill their place in the middle distance with a glow of flame; while other ragworts of orange-red burned like sunset beyond. Their masses were nearly hidden, but they blazed through the receding green and led the sight to other inlets and estuaries of the lake, where rose the mighty parsnip of Hercules, with snowy umbels; the rose-bright heads of giant agrimonies, and the pale mauve stars of mulgediums, that towered beside them.

A ray, cast from moon-coloured blossoms in a dingle, rested Aveline's eyes a little, and while she looked at their lemon crests, she dreamed a hundred pictures; but the planning of them brought her down to the lake itself and the water lilies that sparkled at her feet.

Bright as the jewel dragon-flies that danced there, the lilies floated in their proper companies and echoed the harmonies of the meadowsweets. But their colour ranged beyond: their whiteness was more silvery and sparkling; their redness was of a grander lustre; their pinkness was more pure than the spiræas. They deepened through pale canary yellow to a crimson splendour, where no flower upon the banks could follow them. From the green and mottled discs of leaves overlapping on the clear water, there sprang the flowers, snow-white and shell-pink, blush rose and amaranth and ruby. Their petals, held together with brooches of wrought gold, were of that pearly texture that only water lilies know; their forms were stars that expanded and cups that curved.

Aveline heard footsteps behind her and, looking round, observed a man. He wore grey tweeds, with knickerbockers, and walked briskly. He was tall and well set up. His brown face and clear grey eyes gave a look of health and strength to his countenance. His hair was black and rather long, and he wore a heavy moustache, which con-

cealed the lines of his mouth. He walked close to the visitor, and when he had passed her, glanced round to see her face.

It was Aveline who spoke.

"I hope I am not trespassing?" she said.

Then the young man stopped, raised his cap and answered —

"Oh, no; the gardens are free to the public most part of the day."

"This is perfect. But only an artist could know how perfect."

"Are you an artist?"

"A painter, and an artist, too, I hope."

He nodded. Her frank manner set him at ease, though her rare good looks made him careful.

"This is my water garden."

"Then you're Mr. Ambrose, I suppose?"

"No. I'm an artist, too, in my way — one of his designers. It's my water garden only in the sense that I planned it."

"You made all this loveliness?"

"Not that either. Colne river made it. I sketched the picture and brought the plants together, and Nature and Colne painted it."

"You can't escape the responsibility like that," she said lightly.

The man spoke again, for her pleasant voice and cheerful manner offered a contrast to her widow's weeds and interested him.

"People despair of getting garden beauty out of the flat," he said, "so they dig holes and fling up mounds and try to be what they call 'natural.' As though a level meadow is not as natural as a hillside. But given water, you can do this sort of thing only on the flat."

"I understand."

"Being an artist, I dare say you hate everything formal," he said. "But I'm a formalist; so's Mr. Ambrose."

We're spreading the cult of the formal garden — a thing proceeding by just laws out of the dwelling-house, and not wholly independent of it."

"I believe in form. All good art is founded on form; but forms change. Things that are thought formless to-day will be voted too formal to-morrow."

To hear a woman speak thus surprised the designer.

"You've thought about it," he said, but she did not answer.

"How lovely it would be to see the moonlight on them," she remarked a moment later, looking down at the water lilies.

"They shut up at night," he answered; then he knelt at the water's edge, stretched forward, dipped his hand under the water and plucked a gorgeous crimson blossom of great size. In the midst of its star was a red gold heart.

"D'you see how the dye of the petals runs over into the yellow anthers and stains them ruby? That's a dead man's work — Marliac's masterpiece."

"You have taken the queen off her throne," said Aveline.

"A hybrid — the very best water lily in the world."

He dried the stalk as he spoke and handed the flower to her.

"What a noble thing! May one sketch here, or is that asking too much?"

"By all means, if you wish to."

"I'd love to try this lakelet; but I expect it would beat me," she confessed. "D'you know the underlying colour in it? But you made it, so no doubt you do. It's gold. You feel it more than you see it, but it's everywhere — soaking everything. It can't contain itself. It actually flashes out on a dead water lily leaf, or the edge of a reed, or in those warm, cloudy masses of plume poppy beyond; but the green is full of it, too; it warms every colour — whites and purples and everything — to the ripening seed-heads and flying cotton from the willow-herbs."

"A painter would have to remember the gold, or he'd make it cold and chilly and untrue, I suppose," said the man. "Turner painted Colchester from these meadows once upon a time. There was no water garden then, though."

"There's gold in all he ever painted," she said.

He hesitated and was about to go.

"Am I to keep this?" she asked, lifting the great lily still in her hand.

"Please do; and — and — if you care for this sort of thing — garden planning, I mean — perhaps some day you'd like to come to the studio and see some odds and ends."

"How good of you! Of course I should."

"Any time. I'm generally there; and if I'm not, my colleague is. But ask for me — Peter Mistley."

"I'll gladly come."

"Not your art, you know. But mine."

"By the way, this is 'Colneside,' isn't it?"

"Yes — 'Colneside Gardens.'"

"I know a girl who works here — Margery Mayhew."

"A typewriter — yes. D'you know her well?"

"Pretty well. I'm so sorry about her."

"She and Hempson? She'll get over it."

Aveline pretended that she knew as much as Mr. Mistley.

"Of course. I expect she dreamed it, poor little thing."

"No; I think not. Hempson is one of the best. A real good chap. You won't mention it to her, of course. But he was very much in love with her and meant to ask her to marry him after he came back from China."

"Why didn't he ask her before he went?"

"Because there was a chance he might not come back. A good deal of danger attaches to seed collecting in these out-of-the-way places. As a matter of fact, he did have a squeak of his life. He came back from China in the spring. Out there he was doing well in the hills and breaking new ground. The people seemed friendly enough; but he got

into a tight corner and wasn't too diplomatic with them, I suppose. Too English, or insular. Didn't respect their manners and customs enough. Anyway they fell out with him and they attacked him and his party and destroyed a dozen cases of plants he had collected. One man was killed, but Hempson and the rest escaped. There's a little romance in the matter; perhaps Miss Mayhew told you?"

"Only her own romance."

"Poor Hempson carried one poppy seed in his hand for three days — a sacred poppy or something that he had heard was a marvel. For three days and nights he clung to that capsule, saved it, and brought it home. It's just flowered — a worthless weed. Sacred, perhaps, but its sanctity won't save it."

Aveline was silent, speculating on the misfortunes of the plant-collector. Her natural bent of mind decided her reply.

"He'll have some splendid good luck next time — to make up."

"Doubtful if there'll be a next time. He may not get a commission abroad again — certainly not till after the war."

They parted then, and Peter Mistley said good-bye and went up the gardens.

When he was gone, Aveline thought about him, rather liked him, and wondered if he were married. She decided that he was a sort of man who would be. Then she considered "Marmalade Emma" and William, and laughed gently. Whatever her recent griefs, the young woman appeared full of a joy of life that could not long or patiently regard them.

CHAPTER III

THE STUDIO

THERE are two orders of human beings who lack power of self-expression: those who neither know the need nor feel it — the bulk of mankind — and those who are aware of the lack and in consequence suffer. To these latter belonged Peter Mistley. He was not, however, to be pitied as much as he pitied himself, for while his tongue was slow, his hand was swift. He possessed his art, and through that medium made himself known and valued. As an architectural gardener he had won no small fame, and though he worked anonymously for another and his achievements went to the credit of the firm of Ambrose, yet he was well known in horticultural circles, and his opinions commanded respect beyond his own country. Art sweetened his life and filled it, yet he escaped not the common lot of a discontented mind, and his grievance with fate centred in this: that people preferred his art to himself. His brusque manner alone accounted for it; but he felt himself not really ungracious and, though now accustomed to the experience, continued to regret the coldness of mankind. People were agreeable and amiable while he worked for them; but his accomplishments made no friends. When a garden was finished, those for whom he made it forgot the artist and generally took the applause to their credit.

As a youth he had been morbid and rather absurd in his exactions; now he was thirty-two and growing more sensible. He began to perceive his own limitations with greater patience and concede a charm to others which was beyond his power to imitate. But he grew less self-con-

scious, and cultivated the doing of kind acts and the saying of kind words. He suffered much at the missing of many opportunities, but that he saw the opportunities argued his heart; that he missed them only proved the obstinacy of inherited character over acquired instincts. To-day, as he returned from the water garden to his workshop at another part of "Colneside" nurseries, he felt pleased with himself. For he had spoken freely to a strange woman; he had been amiable, and won from her smiles and given her pleasure. This was an achievement and he was gratified at himself.

The studio, where Mistley and another worked together, stood near the packing sheds and offices. It was a lofty chamber with sea-green walls and white rafters supporting an open roof. High windows rose above the drawing tables, and curtains ran across them, so that light might be modified at need. Upon the walls were hung a hundred drawings, great and small, in plan and elevation. Some were mere notes; some had been highly finished and coloured. They represented gardens in being, or yet to be. Here were studies of lakes and open spaces planned for woodlands and the massing of harmonious trees; here were designs for landscape work and rock gardens fashioned in the natural style. For Mr. Ambrose considered all tastes, and if the art of Peter Mistley, his first draughtsman, was held too severe, and a client desired some achievement in the modern, meandering manner, then did Geoffrey Seabrook undertake the commission, for his skill ran in the direction of the natural garden. Long and endless were the arguments between the fellow-workers — sometimes good-tempered and amiable, sometimes tinged with acerbity, according to the elder man's mood. For it was Peter who occasionally lost patience, never Mr. Seabrook. He was also a bachelor, of delicate build and fair complexion. He had a pretty, rather than a handsome, face, was very fair, with fine eyes, fine teeth, a little roguish, straw-coloured moustache, waxed at the points,

hair flaxen-bright with a natural curl, and long, amber eyelashes. He was finely turned and, in secret, prided himself upon his instep and his ankles. Of a bourgeois family, he dreamed dreams of ancestors unknown, and though presenting a humble and obsequious exterior — a slight man in the estimation of his colleagues and the nursery at large — in his heart harboured the sense of power, and under his humility and imperturbable cheerfulness there dwelt a secret spirit shared and adored by only one other person in the world.

He was a lesser artist than Mistley and proceeded on a lowlier system.

They were arguing to-day as they worked, and Peter, for the thousandth time, enunciated his principles.

“There’s one right and proper way for all artists,” he said, “and that is to go to the theatre of a creation with an empty mind, not a preoccupied one. You always invent a beautiful garden from pure imagination, then, when you’ve got to make a garden, you take it with you in your head, and, whether the place is suited to it or not, that’s the garden you make. I go empty-minded, and, if left alone, which, of course, I seldom am, I let the new site, with all its features of architecture and nature, soak into me for a week or a fortnight; and so my garden slowly grows up — inspired entirely by the scene it is to occupy.”

“A way of perfection,” answered Seabrook. “You know that nine times out of ten it don’t work, and that, as a rule, what you think fine, the people who have to live with the garden probably hate. You know what a thing ought to be; I know what the average, so-called ‘keen gardener,’ with some money to chuck about, likes. And if you’re a shopman, which we are, the thing is to please your customer, not yourself.”

“You are a shopman and you’ve got the soul of a shopman,” answered Mistley. “And so you take the goods in your pocket, like a commercial traveller, and have no respect for places, but only for persons. I despise persons

and venerate places, if they are worthy of veneration. Why should we mutilate a scene and prostitute art for the sake of our own generation? The garden goes on, but the midgets that creep about in it go off and die."

"And so do we," said Geoffrey, laughing, "but we've got to live first." He had a cheerful laugh, like the sudden song of a chaffinch.

"All great artists reverence place," said the other. "Not only painters, but sculptors and novelists, and even musicians."

"Novelists don't," argued Geoffrey Seabrook. "The greatest novelists only reverence character and psychology and all that. And the greatest of all arts, music, is above time and place and all limitations. It defies material bonds, and Beethoven or Wagner will be just as good in the next world as they are in this — perhaps better."

He spoke with animation, for he was a musician himself, sang well and loved to sing.

"You are a far greater artist than I am," he went on. "I know that well enough. What beats me is your use of the material of living things, as well as brick and stone and statue and bridge, and iron scrollwork for great gates, and so on. You're a magnificent, unerring colourist, and you manage water better far than any man in the game."

"Thank you," said Mistle. "You know how to praise. People demand everything at once: that's the nuisance. They deny time its work and want to see raw stone weathered to look like the native rock in a week, a cedar tree look a hundred years old in a twelvemonth."

"We must suffer fools gladly, since we mostly live by them," said Seabrook. "Time is the only great artist when all's said. He puts the master touches to book and picture and garden — always assuming there's strength and stuff in them to stand his hand."

A motor hooted outside the gardens and the sound was familiar. They continued their conversation, and ten minutes later Mr. Ambrose appeared.

“Good-morning, gentlemen,” he said, and they returned the salute. Mistley continued his plan as he did so, but Seabrook dropped his brush, rose, gave a little bow and then sat down again.

Aubrey Parkyn Ambrose was a full-bodied, handsome man of five-and-fifty. His clean-shaved face was somewhat round, but well modelled as to nose and chin; his brow rose high and his thick hair turned towards iron-grey. He had large brown eyes and a big and booming voice. His expression never changed. It presented a steady and unalterable intelligence which never sank to vacuity and never sparkled to inspiration. Like his voice, his face was monotonous. Neither were unkindly; yet neither revealed a ray of humour, or humanism. He moved somewhat heavily.

The master of “Colneside” had inherited and not created his business. His uncle was responsible for it, and he had succeeded by right of law when still a young man. He had a cast of mind destined to succeed in any commercial enterprise, and would have picked up the burden as willingly had the commodity been tea or soap, iron or bricks. His concern lay only with the prosperity of the business, and in course of time, mastering the public needs, he surrounded himself with skilled horticulturists and artists, who knew every detail of nursery work. Each department of the garden was considered and placed in the hands of a specialist; while the financial details alone were the occupation of Mr. Ambrose. He worked very hard, and saw to it that, from Mistley to the smallest garden boy, his staff did the like. He inspired respect, not enthusiasm. In Colchester Mr. Ambrose stood for more than his own stake. He represented the horticultural district interests, and had long been a Borough Councillor for the North Ward and also a member of the County Council for the Tendring Hundred. At this moment he was Mayor of Colchester, for the second time in ten years, and no local worthy had ever discharged his varied duties

in that capacity with more dignity and success. He was married to a woman twenty years younger than himself, who loved the picturesque side of his official duties, and interested herself in his business to the extent of being much attached to flowers. They dwelt not at Colchester, but on Mersea Island in a handsome residence, whose lawns sloped to the sea. Mr. Ambrose drove in daily by motor-car. He rose at six o'clock, winter and summer, and only on rare occasions was out of bed after ten o'clock at night.

"No letter from Ireland, Mistley," he said. "I expect his lordship is preoccupied with recruiting, and won't renew interest in the gardens yet awhile."

Mistley nodded and sat back from his work.

"I thought of going into Devonshire next week to see the Saltoun place."

"I should do so. Mr. Saltoun awaits your coming. He wants something pretty extensive, I fancy. He was describing the idea to me when I met him at the meeting of the Royal Horticultural last month. You'll like him: he has your large, synthetical ideas. It's an old Elizabethan house and ——"

"I have the photographs," said Mistley.

"Well, go down at your own convenience."

The manner of Mr. Ambrose was courteous and deferential; but upon addressing Seabrook it changed. The deference, not the courtesy, disappeared.

"If you're not desperately busy, Seabrook, I wish you'd ask Bultitude to pick a basket of carnations for Mrs. Ambrose. She is in the car, waiting for me."

"I'll do so at once," answered the draughtsman. Then he rose, took his hat, and went into the gardens.

After he had gone, the master examined his work.

"Does this strike you as altogether happy?" he asked, and Mistley came over to look at the design.

"It's the sort of thing they wanted, I believe."

"What is his purpose here?" inquired Mr. Ambrose, pointing to an empty space in the plan.

"A clump of deciduous stuff with good autumn colour. A sugar maple, he thought, with shumacs and liquidamber, and parrotia, perhaps."

"Excellent. I'm bound to say, however, that I share your dislike for these winding paths. There's a tendency to overdo them."

"One remembers the old French joke — that these wobbling ways can only be invented by a drunken gardener."

Mr. Ambrose did not smile.

"I see the point of the jest, though I can't say it amuses me. Seabrook's tendency is to let imagination run away with his art. That's why your influence is so valuable."

"He gives people what they want."

"The average artist is content with that, I believe."

"Yes, and mistakes their applause for success."

"Seabrook is not touched to your higher issues. A worthy fellow and rich in imagination. One can't deny that he has planned many beautiful gardens; but he will never make your higher appeal. He has much to learn from you, though very likely he would not be such a valuable man to me if he learned it."

"He won't change."

"In some ways," said Mr. Ambrose, "you might learn from him, too — not in the matter of horticultural architecture, my dear fellow: we are all your pupils there — but in a matter far more important. You know what I mean."

Mistley nodded and returned to his own drawing.

"Faith is a very fine thing," he admitted; "but reason is finer."

"Faith can move mountains, Mistley."

"Reason can tunnel them. I've got faith, too, for that matter. You can't live without it."

"Not the childlike faith of our common friend."

"No, but a manlike faith, founded in reason — faith in mankind."

"We Christians do not lack that, you know. I'm bound to say that reason does not awake in me that admirable trust in my own species which is so vital — the trust and sympathy with man as man. But I trust them in the light of their Maker. Did He not send His own Son, to save them from themselves? And shall we distrust the being for whom His Maker made so stupendous a sacrifice? No! Perhaps you have not thought of that? I made the point to myself — while I was meditating recently among our delphiniums.

"The simplicity of Seabrook," continued Mr. Ambrose, "has a great value. The simple-minded, with no arms but the breastplate of Faith, have made their mark on the world's history. Take the Crusaders. If history tells us aright, they were animated by one pure and uplifted purpose. I have been reading about Peter the Hermit only lately. What a flame animated that man!"

"Such men are used by inferior men to advance their own base purposes. Those that led the Crusaders were out for a good deal more than the rescue of the Holy Land from the Turk. But I don't know much about it, I confess."

Seabrook returned, and Mr. Ambrose discussed his plan with him.

"I rather deprecate these curves," he said, and the draughtsman instantly fell in with his suggestions.

"I haven't felt quite happy about them myself, Mr. Ambrose. I waited to consult you. My alternative idea was this. In fact, that is how I laid out the plan first."

He pencilled the drawing.

"Better — emphatically better. Send in the drawing before Saturday. Sir Charles is a busy man, and he will then be able to study it, for he spends his week-ends at home. This should please him. Money is not an object, and he will be prepared to pay for specimen plants. When the carnations come up, you might take them to the car, Seabrook. My wife has a favour to ask."

"Proud to oblige Mrs. Ambrose, always, sir."

Mr. Ambrose smiled.

"You are the most good-natured of men. I am going to the office now for a few moments. I shall return this afternoon about four of the clock. I lunch at Colchester. The Council meets afterwards."

He left them, and neither spoke for a few moments. Then Mistley burst out —

"What a worm you are, Seabrook! I hate you sometimes for cringing to that man."

"I don't cringe, my dear chap. Why should you call it cringing? If anybody is polite and considerate and delicate-minded, as Ambrose always is, why should not I be the same?"

"He patronises you."

"I don't think so; and if he does, there's no harm in having a patron. After all, what's the sense in being uppish or grudging? I work for him. My money comes from him."

"You could get your money anywhere."

"Perhaps I could; but why think it necessary to snap at the hand that feeds you — as you do?"

"I don't snap; I'm merely independent. You lick the hand that feeds you."

Seabrook flushed under his clear skin.

"Why are you so unpleasant?"

"What does she want you for? To sing at one of her blessed concerts, or dinner-parties. To sing, either for charity, or to amuse her guests."

"Very likely. Why not? I can sing, and why should I refuse to sing?"

"And behind your back she calls you the 'harmless, necessary Seabrook.'"

"Not unkindly — not with any unpleasant meaning. She is much too good-hearted for that. To be necessary and harmless is more than some people are."

Mistley, for invisible reasons, appeared to be in a bad temper. He was silent for a few moments, then suddenly recovered.

"I'm sorry. What the devil business is it of mine? Ambrose said I'd got a bit to learn from you and he was right. You're worth a hundred of me. To be self-possessed is the whole art of living — so Goethe says. You're always self-possessed — that's something — perhaps everything."

"I can get what I want out of life my way. And I hope you'll get what you want out of it your way. Though I doubt it," answered Seabrook, smiling.

"Only an inferior order of intellect is ever contented, in my opinion," answered the elder.

The head man of the gardens entered with a mighty bunch of carnations, scarlet and crimson, pink and white.

James Bultitude was short and square and solid — a resolute, underhung man, who had worked in the gardens from his twelfth year and was now in supreme authority out of doors.

"Here's the carnations," he said. "If Mr. Ambrose wants me, I'm in the propagating house."

Geoffrey Seabrook, bareheaded, with his curls shining in the sun, proceeded where a lady sat in a motor-car outside the gate of the gardens.

Mrs. Ambrose was slight and dainty. She looked hardly more than twenty-five, though in reality ten years older. Her fair face beamed with vivacity and sex; her mouth was large and showed her white teeth at every word. Her manner was a little exaggerated and theatrical. She challenged and charmed; but though her heart was warm, her memory was short. Kind thoughts and generous promises leapt to her lips; but she often lacked steadfastness to preserve the one, or perform the other. She was wholly delightful in anybody's company; but out of sight proved often out of mind with Helena Ambrose. Her friends for-

gave her on the score of her busy life and indifferent memory; impartial people said she was insincere. She greeted the draughtsman effusively, took the flowers from him and chatted while he stood by the car. Once or twice she rested her hand on his arm. He stood quiet, happy and submissive.

“Good-morning, Mr. Seabrook. How lovely! What glorious weather! Did my husband tell you? A favour. I’m always asking favours. You’ve guessed it. Our dinner-party next month. It will be so heavenly of you if you’ll come.”

“With the greatest pleasure. I’ve got the new song right now — the one you told me to get — words by Cammaerts.”

“How splendid of you! Did you like it? I thought it beautiful; and the moment I heard it, I said ‘that’s the song for Mr. Seabrook’!”

“I liked it tremendously.”

She made a little face at the back of the white-clad car-driver, who sat in front of her.

“I’m afraid it won’t be a very lively entertainment.”

“Then it will be your first party that was dull.”

“That godless old Carbonell is coming, and Parkyn always wants a stout Christian or two to support him when Dr. Carbonell comes. Mr. Odington and his wife and daughter, and Mrs. Chaffe and her girl. That’s the lot. Only eight. Do you feel equal to it?”

“I shall look forward to it exceedingly.”

“You can’t form any idea of the pleasure you’ll give,” she said, staring into his eyes. “You’re much too modest to dream it, you gifted thing!”

Her husband appeared and entered the car.

Geoffrey bowed rather low as they prepared to start, and Mr. Ambrose spoke.

“To the Moot Hall,” he said to the driver, then turned to Seabrook. “Be good enough to tell Miss Mayhew to

have all my letters ready for signing at four o'clock — not later."

They sped away, the man gazing at the sky, while his wife, gathering up the carnations, nursed them, conscious that she made a picture.

CHAPTER IV

“PERFECTION IN A NUTSHELL”

AVELINE had promised to visit her new friend and she kept her word. Margery Mayhew lived with her uncle, who was head working gardener at “Colneside,” and the common interests of niece and uncle centred at the nurseries.

Aveline was warned by Margery on the day of her visit, for she reached “Fair View Villa” at Mile End before Mr. Mushet returned.

“He’s house-proud,” explained Gregory’s niece. “This little house was planned by him and made for him. He’ll want to take you round, and, seeing the size, you mightn’t think that was much of an ordeal; but it will be, because he’ll stop every minute.”

“It’s a very comfortable house, I’m sure.”

They were in the little front garden as they spoke, where every flower stood in its place, tied to a stick, like somebody being photographed with his head on a rest.

“Uncle’s got a saying, and I warn you not to laugh when he says it, Mrs. Brown. He’ll tell you that perfection is what he’s out for, and he won’t be put off with anything less.”

“Doesn’t he know you can’t get perfection?”

“Rather not! That’s the beauty of it. He reckons he has got perfection. And he calls ‘Fair View Villa’ ‘perfection in a nutshell.’”

A man passed the outer gate, where the women stood to welcome Mr. Mushet. He was very tall, broad-shouldered and brawny. He wore a strange hat, and his face was half buried in a heavy black beard and whiskers and

moustache. The eyes were bright, the nose massive, the expression gloomy. He smiled, however, at seeing Margery, and nodded to her, hesitated, as though about to stay, and then passed on with a brief salutation.

“Good evening, Margery.”

“Good evening, Andrew.”

“What a splendid man,” said Aveline, when he had passed. Then she looked at the girl and started, for Miss Mayhew had turned very pale.

“Is that the Mr. Hempson Mr. Mistley was telling me about?” she asked, ignoring the other’s emotion.

Margery nodded.

“What wonderful experiences he must have had in China, and what bad luck!”

Margery nodded again.

“It’s his turn for good luck now, and I’m positive he’s soon going to get some,” declared the elder, who possessed a fatal instinct for telling people things that she felt they would like to hear.

A little warmth returned to Margery’s cheek.

“He’s nothing to me,” she said, thereby indicating that Mr. Hempson was everything to her.

Then came Gregory Mushet. He was a small, sturdy man, solidly built and rather bow-legged. The marks of toil were on his boots and gaiters and hands. His mouth was clean-shaved, but a white fringe of hair descended from his ears and met under his chin. His head was very bald; his eyes, over which age had half drawn the eyelids, were cheerful, contented and confident.

“This is Mrs. Brown, who has come to live at Colchester, Uncle Greg.”

Mr. Mushet shook hands.

“I’ll brush up and we’ll have tea. Don’t you show Mrs. Brown the place, Margery. I’ll go round with her. She’ll be wishing to see it, no doubt.”

They had tea presently, and Mr. Mushet proved in a philosophic vein.

Apropos of a man who had that day been dismissed from the nurseries for intemperance, he spoke.

"I often say you never know what you may come to. Now that's a true and helpful thought, eh?"

"True, yes," answered Aveline, "but not particularly helpful."

"Most helpful," declared Mr. Mushet triumphantly, "because it often helps you not to come to it!"

The visitor laughed.

"I hadn't thought of that," she said.

"For young people, you always want to set up an object before their eyes — something for them to work for and hope for," he said. "For instance, take this house. A young person, without any particular ideas for his future, comes in and has tea with me and Margery, as you are doing now. They see this house, and then, most likely for the first time in their lives, understand to what a pitch a house may be brought up. What happens then? If he's worth anything, the young person instantly gets a hope and a resolve, that some day, please God, he'll have a house like it. It uplifts him to work, and very likely improves his whole career."

"It's a very compact house," said Aveline.

"It's a great deal more than compact, I assure you," declared the owner. "A box of matches is compact. We rise a good bit above that at 'Fair View,' don't we, Margery? Cast your eyes round this room, for instance."

Aveline obeyed. She began to dislike Mr. Mushet: he was conceited.

Round the walls of the parlour, in remarkable frames of his own making, the gardener had arranged works of art. A print of "The Forester's Family," by Sir Edwin Landseer, occupied the place of honour and hung high on one wall. Next came the picture of a knightly figure in armour bidding farewell to a beautiful damsel. It was a wash-drawing touched with white chalk. There followed

an oleograph landscape with black fir trees, a blood-red sunset, and much snow upon which five wolves hunted a man in a sledge.

“Life and action, you see,” explained Mr. Mushet. “It catches the evening sun, and that’s the time to look at it. Some people say it’s hand-painted, others that it’s a print; but what does it matter how it was made if it couldn’t be better? I dare say you’ve marked that I will have variety with my pictures. These works were bought at sales. I’ve let many and many a picture go — just because it missed perfection. You may notice my religious picture is hung over the harmonium.”

Aveline lifted her eyes to a German print of “Daniel in the Lion’s Den.”

“To have hung that over the harmonium was a touch I dare say you’d missed?” asked Mr. Mushet.

“I’m afraid I had.”

“Many do until I point it out. And then they see. It’s just a feeling for propriety. The house bristles with touches like that, and the result is completeness. It runs through the bedrooms and everything. You might find many a house with more luxuries, and yet nothing of the completeness. As for luxuries, so called, when you come to examine them, they often fade into air. For instance, what’s the use of a bathroom if you never have a bath? None, and I’ll challenge the world to deny it.”

“You do have a bath every Saturday night, uncle,” said Margery.

“I wash myself in my own way — every inch,” admitted Mr. Mushet; “but not by lying and stewing in hot water. That’s luxury, and I despise it. Then take electric light. A candle was good enough for my forefathers, and how am I better than them, except by education? Comfort is better than show, and ease of body more important than pride of mind. Try that arm-chair.”

Aveline, who had finished an excellent tea, obeyed.

“Deliciously comfortable,” she said; “but every time I

looked up I should be wondering if the wolves were going to catch the man."

"They can't, because it's a picture," explained Mr. Mushet. "In this house—the work of forty years almost—you go from completeness to completeness. What I was out for was perfection in a nutshell, you understand, and I claim no less. You must see the best parlour now. Margery calls it the drawing-room; I call it the best parlour."

"What's in a name?" asked Aveline.

"Exactly. Here we eat, there we sit. My best pictures of all are there, and other works of pure ornament for the eye, such as glass and china. So what I say is, that if anybody gave me a thousand a year and a castle, d'you know what I'd do? I'd sell the castle and put the money in the bank and stop at 'Fair View'!"

"You're the most contented man I ever met," said Aveline.

"The truth of the matter is that Uncle Gregory doesn't know he's born," explained Margery. "He doesn't know the dreadful things that might have happened to him, and so he doesn't know his luck."

But Mr. Mushet would not allow this.

"If I granted that, it would be to give up all credit," he said. "There's lots of traps set for every man that hops hopefully into the world—just as there is for every bird—and I'm not vain enough to say I was never caught. Who can? But I shouldn't be where I am—in this house—if I'd been caught many times."

Aveline had never seen anybody quite so pleased with himself as Mr. Mushet. Her responsive nature began to share the old man's enthusiasm.

"It's too wonderful for anything," she said. "Your house is a work of art, Mr. Mushet. So's your garden, I'm sure."

"When you say 'garden,' Mrs. Brown," he answered, "you touch my pride. If I was a vain sort of man I

might weary your mind about my garden. But when anybody says ‘garden,’ I answer nothing and just take ‘em into mine and let them draw their own conclusions.”

“And the conclusion always is that, for its size, Uncle Gregory’s garden is the most wonderful in Colchester,” said Margery.

“Only twelve yards by eighteen—you must always keep that in mind,” explained Mr. Mushet. “Only twelve by eighteen and yet, as Madge says, nothing like it in Colchester. Of course, as a professional gardener I have a big pull in that matter over amateurs; yet when I tell them the size, many of the nicest minded people think I’m a liar.”

They went out presently and inspected the garden. A withering precision characterised it.

“Here you see the difference between a garden and a nursery,” said the owner. “In our forty acres of nursery, the plants have a certain amount of freedom and are nearer to nature, so to speak; but let a plant once come into such a garden as this and it instantly gets under the influence of science.”

“In your garden they soon find ‘that life is real, life is earnest.’”

“Yes,” said the gardener. “You can get shirkers in a flower-bed, same as anywhere else, and it isn’t everybody knows when a plant’s not doing its best. I’ll have no nonsense here. I do my part—above ground and beneath; and Nature does her part; and if the plant don’t do its part, I soon put a sharp question.”

“I suppose they have got their constitutions,” suggested the visitor, “and some are rugged and hearty and some are delicate and tender?”

“Yes, that is so; and if you like hospital work, you can always fill your garden with half hardy stuff and doubtful doers and miffy plants that quaver before rain or sun, or heat or cold. In fact, invalids. ‘Colneside’ must have such plants, of course, because some people’s whole idea of

gardening is to make things live in England that God planned to flourish in the Canary Islands, or to murder good plants on a south wall, that only ought to dwell in a hothouse. But when a plant begins to go home here, he's very soon out of his misery and out of my garden."

"I don't believe uncle's ever got to love flowers, though he's worked at them all his life," said Margery.

"I like 'em as my brother, Samuel Mushet, of the oyster fishery, likes his marine engines," explained Gregory. "My brother, you must know, is the engineer on the Fishery Company's steamboat, *Peewit*, and his engines are a picture, same as my garden is; but he'll stand no nonsense and will have everything just so; for with a steam-engine, just the same as with a garden such as this, you must be servant, or master."

"And has he got such a wonderful house as yours?" asked Aveline.

"No, he has not: he's married. I'm not running down his house, however. He's got a mechanical mind, and you'll very seldom find a man that looks after machinery to live in an untidy or lawless house. A man, if he is a free man, is reflected in his house and his clothes, and his outlook on the world in general; but a married man is not a free man: he's only half a man, in the sense that he's called to share his life with another order of creation, that looks at all things from the female angle, which, of course, is quite different from ours. So when you go into my brother's house at Brittlesea you don't go into the house of Samuel Mushet, you go into the house of Mr. and Mrs. Mushet, which, naturally, is quite another creation. Then, again, if a pair have no children, the understanding mind knows it before they've walked through the hall of the house, and so you may say a house is either the home of a man, or the home of a man and his wife, or the home of a man and his wife and his family."

"I never heard anything truer than that," declared Aveline.

“In my brother’s case, he has one boy; a very good, hard-working, modest youth. He’d marry Madge to-morrow for that matter.”

“Teddy’s a dear, good chap, but I never could marry any man not older than myself,” replied Mr. Mushet’s niece. “Brightlingsea’s a very nice place,” she continued. “It’s flat down there, but the mud banks are beautiful when the sea lavender comes out.”

“Mud banks are always beautiful,” said Aveline. “I love Essex already; it’s a most delightful county, to my thinking — full of wonderful landscape and covered with wonderful skies, because the horizons are often so low. I’m going to paint pictures, and I shall be perfectly happy if I can only sell them.”

“To make things is one job: to sell them is another,” said Mr. Mushet. “The things that people must have, like food and clothes and a roof overhead, they’ll buy; but when it comes to the higher flights, they think twice. There must be perfect peace of mind and easiness of pocket before we reach up to pictures.”

“My rooms are too expensive,” declared the visitor, “and I shan’t have easiness of pocket much longer if I stop in them. D’you think I could find two up here? I like it here on the hill. It’s breezier than down below. But perhaps lodgings will be more expensive here?”

“What about Mrs. Hempson, Madge?” asked her uncle. “Since Andrew Hempson had his bad luck they’re a bit in low water, and I happen to know his mother’s going to let if she can. Andrew wants to be off again, but Mr. Ambrose isn’t taking any more chances for the present — not till after the war, anyway. Too fiery, that man — Hempson, I mean. I believe half the mess he got into was owing to his temper.”

“I’m sure it wasn’t,” said Margery.

“He couldn’t hit it off with the heathen, where the rare plants grow, and they very nearly knocked his brains out,” explained Mr. Mushet.

"If Margery will take me to see Mrs. Hempson to-morrow, or any convenient day, I'll gladly go," said Aveline; "and now I mustn't keep you any more. I've enjoyed myself very much indeed, and some day I'll paint a picture for you, Mr. Mushet."

She left them, and each was a little dubious when she had gone.

"If she goes there, she'll fall in love with Andrew — sure to," said Margery. "She's lovely, isn't she?"

"She's a lady," answered Gregory Mushet. "You can always tell them. And a very nice lady to look at, as you say; but she's one of two things — hard-hearted, or light-minded. Or she may be both."

"She's not hard-hearted, uncle. I know that. She's all heart."

"Then she's light-minded," replied the old man. "For why? She's a new-made widow, for one thing, though her black's only just decent for the state. And being so, she's a darned sight too cheerful and lively in my opinion."

"Perhaps her husband wasn't nice," suggested Margery.

"Another thing," continued Mr. Mushet, "she's seen my pictures, and in my judgment it was a thought pushing to offer me one of hers, before she knew if I had any use for it. It's rather vain to offer your work to another who's got what's better already, for you may feel pretty sure a handsome, pleasure-loving young woman like her can't paint a picture worthy to stand beside mine. And if, with the best intentions, she gives me a picture I don't hold with, I shan't put it up, I warn you. I won't spoil the house to minister to an outsider's vanity."

CHAPTER V

THE DWARF FIR TREES

AVELINE began the picture of the water garden and worked in a broad, free, modern method. She drew very largely with the brush. Her personal experience was that if the sky came right, the rest came right; if the sky came wrong, then she began once more. Her sky she always put in first and never touched again. She painted very wet, and had a little effective trick with water shadows of which she was proud. Artists said her work was naïve and alive; laymen either liked it very much, or frankly disliked it. She had been accepted and hung in London on one or two occasions; but to paint for a living was a new experience, and Aveline now tried to impress upon her mind the gravity of the situation.

"I've always lived to please myself until now," she thought, "and now I must please other people to live at all."

Peter Mistley came down during her second morning at the picture, and she painted without embarrassment, while he looked on. To his surprise he found that Aveline made no business of showing him the picture, and revealed no particular desire to learn what he thought of it. She greeted him in a bright and cheerful spirit and went on with her thoughts aloud.

"So glad to see somebody to talk to," she said. "I hate thinking to myself; it's so much pleasanter to think to other people. I was just envying those artists who can do absolutely first-rate work—and still be popular. There are just a few wonderful painters and writers who are great artists and at the same time have a wide circle.

So they get the best of both worlds. Now people like that, I think, are the luckiest on earth, don't you?"

"Perhaps they are; but that's not fame. Fame is something that embalms the work of the dead and inoculates it against the moth and rust of time. But it must be a joy, as you say, to please those whose opinion you value — even to get one really first-class man to be interested in you."

"Or one really first-class woman," said Aveline.

"One can't wish for better luck. Ruskin made Turner."

"Turner made himself. Ruskin pointed out that Turner was a stupendous swell; which, for the moment, people didn't see. But Ruskin wasn't the only person in the world that mattered. It was Turner who mattered, not Ruskin. Ruskin may have quickened things and helped Turner's banking account; but he doesn't help Turner's fame — not if Fame's what you say it is."

"But Ruskin incited Turner — bucked him up, made him paint."

"I don't believe it," declared Aveline. "I believe that Turner must have often been bored to death by Ruskin. I believe it was the trying to live up to Ruskin that made it absolutely necessary for Turner to vanish and wallow in the sty from time to time, just to be human and get a bit of his own back. I don't believe Ruskin bucked him up at all. I think it's much more likely that he depressed him and lowered his vitality. Nothing lowers the vitality like trying to be good; because nine times out of ten, you're trying to be something you can't be and were never meant to be. Turner was never meant to be good. He was meant to be an immortal genius, sent into the world that we might have light, and have it more abundantly. I hate all this talk about being good. You don't whine at a grape because the pips are sour, or at a lily because its bulb lives happiest in the mire. That's the lily's business, and if the petals are like those" — she pointed at a silver

star in the water at their feet — “and if its heart is such a miracle of precious workmanship, why on earth do you want to worry, because it doesn’t live on bread and butter and spend its spare time doing good works?”

Mistley was much astonished, for she spoke almost with bitterness. This was no impersonal criticism. Her thoughts sprang from experience. He marvelled, and his heart went out to her till his head pulled it back a little.

“Dangerous sort of doctrine. But we do gather grapes from thistles and figs from thorns, where art is born,” he admitted.

“And I’d sooner be great than good, any day,” she declared; “but most people, of course, are neither. Anyhow we know what greatness is; but we don’t know what goodness is. And some of us don’t care.”

“I feel like that — up to a point,” he said.

“The thing is to make things — if you can,” she declared. “The only really precious people in the world are those who make things; and if other people, through ignorance or stupidity or wickedness, come between us, who can make things, and our work, then life isn’t worth living. Men don’t understand that half as well as women. For thousands of years you’ve told us we can’t make things, and prevented us from making anything but babies, and then invited us to see that everything worth making is made by man. But now we’re being educated and getting a chance, you’ll soon see that in everything that matters we’re as good as you.”

“I dare say you’ll prove it in time. In fact you are proving it. It is cruel and damnable to take men away from making things. That is one of the cruel, damnable things about this war. Thinking of sending creators — artists — out to destroy.”

“And be destroyed. I don’t care how many Germans we kill, because their art is dead — poisoned at the roots — and this generation of them may as well be swept away as not; but our art is full of life and hope.”

He became personal.

"You belong to the school of East and Brangwyn, I see," he said. "As a landscape man myself, I admire them. You're getting the essentials of this place. D'you see the willows as dark as that?"

"Don't you?"

"No — can't say I do. But perhaps you want them dark for the sake of something else?"

"I'll lighten them."

"Don't, if you think they're right."

"I never think anything I do is right when it's done," she answered. "It's only a joy while I'm doing it."

"The water's going to be glorious," he said. He stood and watched her work. It seemed slap-dash after his own careful convention, for he only painted in elevation for the sake of customers, who lacked the imagination to see the force of ground plans. His art was represented by the finished garden; but hers was a greater thing. He called her attention to a passage or two, and she saw the value of his criticism sometimes, but not always.

"Some of the things you don't like are wrong," she admitted, "but some of the things you don't like are right, because they are just me."

"You paint wonderfully," he assured her. "This garden has never been done your way. Most people smother it with details; you're going to get the larger truth of it, which is easily lost among a lot of little niggling truths."

She stopped presently, lifted her board off the easel and set it in the sun.

"Now it must dry," she said. "Have you got a cigarette?"

He had not.

"I only smoke a pipe," he confessed.

"It doesn't matter. I wanted to see what sort you smoked," she answered, very frankly. Then she produced one of her own.

"I've got to choose some dwarf trees. Come and help me," he suggested, wondering at himself.

She agreed, and they left the water garden and walked to another part of the nursery, a quarter of a mile distant. She lagged among the lovely things, but he would not stop until they came to a colony of tiny conifers — perfect, pygmy trees from Canada and Italy, from China and Japan. Here were pines and firs; yews and thuyas; wondrous, magic junipers of every shape and hue, some golden bright; some silvery, some very dark and solid, some with feathery finials as blue as the sky.

Aveline was enthusiastic. "They're darlings," she said.

"Natural dwarfs — fat and prosperous, as you see."

"So much the better. I don't like things pinched and starved and stunted."

"That's only because you don't understand what the Japanese are after. They would scoff at this show of healthy, hearty things. Mind you, I don't like Japanese gardens stuck in the middle of English ones; but our gardens to theirs are a child's mud-pie to a princess's wedding-cake."

"I like to see plants happy," she declared.

"The earthiness of our gardens is simply revolting," he assured her; and in her reply Aveline told him more about herself.

"What's the matter with earthiness?" she asked. "What's the good of starving plants to stimulate our souls? We don't starve cats and dogs."

"The pathetic fallacy it's called, I believe," he answered. "We see a dwarfed fir a century old, and it tells us of strife and struggle against adversity. It is trained, perhaps, to look as though it had been struck by lightning, and it bears such a weight of affliction in its branches, that the tiny thing typifies the whole human experience."

"A sermon in a flower-pot. But not a sermon for me. What does it really mean? That man has bullied Nature for a century and turned what might have been a happy

forest tree into a miserable little object hanging with one root in the air over the side of a bit of porcelain."

"How brutally rational! You know something about plants?"

"Nothing at all, nothing at all," she answered hurriedly; "but of course everybody's seen these things — these tortured things, clinging to dear life by their eyelids."

"Such solemn atoms, rightly understood, mean such a lot," he argued.

"I know just what they mean and I hate what they mean. I'm a Northern vandal, and I don't love these emaciated, Japanese masterpieces a bit. I know it's subtle and full of soul to make a mountain on a flower-pot, and a countryside on a tea-tray, and put little, withered, blasted plants in just the right places. I know the artists who do these things are faithful and great; but I hate thirst and starvation myself — and root pruning and discipline generally. And so do the plants. I know what they feel about it well enough, because I've been root-pruned and starved and made to live upside down myself in my time. And I've got no use for the spiritual significance of it all, or the Wisdom of the East either; and if I had a garden, I'd let things grow as they liked and make them happy below ground, so that they should be lovely above it. So there!"

"I never!" said Mistley.

"I want the joy of life, I suppose, while I'm young enough to feel the joy of life. Beauty is a relative term. Probably I haven't got a soul."

"You've got a soul all right."

"We've all got lots of things we don't bother about while we're young — joints and eyes and livers and hearts. We shall know we've got them soon enough. I came to Colchester to give my soul a rest."

"Jolly sensible. Nothing wants more rest than a man's soul."

"Except a woman's. I love these happy, little trees."

"Choose six for me, Mrs. Brown."

"All different?"

"Yes — they'd better be."

She obeyed, and gave her reasons for her choice. The man began to find himself forgetting time and space. Her beauty, already exaggerated in his eyes, fascinated him; her point of view rather harmonised with his own. He became very interested and desirous to know more about her. The glimpses were exciting. She gave him more. She had taken two rooms with Mrs. Hempson at Mile End, and was going to work very hard indeed.

"D'you think one of the picture shops here would let me give a little exhibition presently?" she asked.

"I'll inquire about it, if you'll let me."

"How good of you. But not yet. I must paint thirty or forty pictures first. I'm afraid my way of painting won't be much good here."

"You must educate Colchester up to your way."

"You can't do that. Still, if I can get just a few to believe in me ——"

"I'm certain you will. You'll have to make some concessions though. You know what people call 'finish.'"

"Only too well," she said.

An hour was gone, and Mistle left her to return to her picture alone. He marked the plants that she had chosen.

"They're going to Devonshire," he told her.

"Lucky little beggars," said Aveline. "I wish I was going with them. I've been once and loved it."

"Why did you come here, then?"

"For no reason in particular. After my husband died, I was free to go where I pleased. And Colchester just came into my head. And when anything comes into my head I generally do it; and when a place comes into my head, I generally go there — if I can."

"It shows you only think of frightfully innocent things, if you can always do them."

"Doesn't it?"

"Have you ever been abroad?"

"Never; but I'm going."

"You'll be so happy in Italy some day, that you won't come home again," he prophesied.

"You came home again."

"How d'you know I went?"

"Because you speak so positively about it."

"I have been, and mean to go again."

"Heavenly gardens there?"

"Heavenly — and pictures."

"To be painted?"

"Already painted and to be painted — by you, perhaps. I must go. They'll wonder what has become of me."

At the end of that day there came a strange, wistful, not unpleasant feeling into Mistle which was new to him. He had never loved anything but his art, and held that no artist should marry; for he believed that to the artist a wife can only be a mistress.

CHAPTER VI

THE DOCTOR

BILLY AMBROSE and Emma Darcy were walking down the High Street of Colchester regardless of the attention they commanded. Their fame was of long standing and they were indifferent to it. Youngsters, greatly daring, would sneak close, squeal "Marmalade Emma!" and then fly to safe distance. But the hawk does not disdain the protesting swallows more than they the insulting boys. They strolled along, looked into the shop windows, and proceeded upon their way.

This man and woman seldom differed, but now they did. Opposite the Moot Hall stood a handsome motor-car, and William, recognising it for his brother's, crossed the road.

"Good alive! don't you go over there!" said Emma, trying to hold him back. "You'd best the Owd Un, we all know; but you can't best him."

"Let go, Emma," he answered.

"Don't be talking, and come along to Dr. Carbonell," she said. "You very nilly choked wi' coughing last night, and you're drunk now."

"I'm going to tell the bloke I'm ill and see how he takes it," declared William.

But the car was empty, and so he began to talk to the driver — a young man who became very self-conscious and blushed at Billy's raillery.

"Why haven't you joined the army, you lazy dog?" he asked. "There you sit in slave's clothes with a crest on your buttons, which your master's got no right to sport, and lead the life of a louse, instead of being a free man in khaki, fighting for your country."

"They won't pass me," said the youth.

"I'd go to-morrow," declared Billy, for the benefit of a few gaping hearers, "if it weren't for Marmalade Emma here. But what's going to come of her if I go?"

"They'd lock her up, where she ought to be," said a man.

"You dog!" answered Billy. "If I wasn't weak as a rat with coughing all night, I'd grind your nose in the dirt for that."

The other retorted, and Emma tried in vain to get William along.

"I don't go till I've seen my brother, the Mayor of Colchester," he declared. "The poor fellow don't see enough of me, or he'd have more sense."

People began to collect and a policeman appeared to move them along. Out of respect for his brother, William was treated more leniently in Colchester than might have been the case under other circumstances. Now, however, he was told to be off.

Then Parkyn Ambrose appeared.

The two men were alike save that intemperance and exposure disfigured the bearded features of the tramp, while his brother's clean-shaven face was healthy and plump. He flushed rosy at sight of William.

"I beg you — I beg you ——" he said.

"Have no fear, old boy — only I just thought I'd see how you liked being Mayor, and if you were going to invite me to the Oyster Banquet presently."

"Take him away, woman," said Mr. Ambrose. "I can do nothing for him."

"I am taking him so fast as I can," answered Emma. "He's ill — he's got a crool cough, and I'm taking him to doctor — only he won't come."

"I'm coming, I'm coming. Don't you think I'm going to die, Parkyn, old sport! Far from it, my poor fellow. I shall live till you're under the daisies — oh, yes, I shall, and then I shall say, 'Lord, lettest thou thy servant depart in peace!'"

Mr. Ambrose rolled his eyes like a frightened bullock. He was terribly distressed. He turned to Emma.

"Take him to the hospital and say I sent him."

Then the master of "Colneside" attempted to get into his car; but Billy suddenly sat down in the open door and barred the way.

"Hospital — eh? You're a brother to be proud of! Oh, you good, Christian man! If you was ill, you'd send for half Harley Street; but me — you'd let me rot in a blasted hospital, wouldn't you? and give the nurse a little bottle of something short to drop in my physic, if you dared!"

Mr. Ambrose beckoned the policeman who stood close at hand.

"Move him," he said. "I'm sorry, William Ambrose, but I have no choice. This is outrageous."

"Take me for a joy ride, there's an old dear," shouted Billy. Then he found himself picked up and handed over to Emma.

He laughed boisterously and waved his hand to his brother.

"You go to the hospital and tell 'em to hang out the flags — I'm coming!" he bawled after the departing car.

Then, his outrage accomplished, he calmed down and followed Emma. They plunged into a narrow side street and the incident ended so far as the public was concerned. But the woman blamed him.

"You didn't ought," said Emma. "He's all-powerful now, being Mayor, and he might do you an injury."

Billy coughed violently and then responded.

"My dear child, it's good for the poor wretch to be shook up now and again," he said. "It reminds him he's only a mortal man after all, and not a fat angel squatting on the footstool of God. I'm his skeleton at the feast of life. I'm sent here for his good. The poor creature is fairly itching to be at my death-bed, but he shan't: I'll be at his."

The prophecy cheered Billy, and he proceeded quite amiably beside Emma. Past Trinity Church they went, where the little, flowery graveyard lay in peace amid the hum and bustle of the living; and then, opposite the tower of early English brick and stone, over against that little lancet door so fair to see, the tramps stopped and knocked at the entrance of a small Georgian house.

They asked for Dr. Carbonell, and the maidservant, regarding them suspiciously, explained that her master did not see patients.

"Not common people, we know," said Emma, "but he'll see us."

William chuckled.

"That's right. Tell him Mr. Billy Ambrose is on the door-step and the doctor will bid me come in. And don't fear for the umbrellas. We've left ours at home on the grand piano."

The maid showed uneasiness and departed hurriedly.

"'Father, forgive her, for she knows not what she does,'" said William.

A moment later they were told that the doctor would see them, and they were conducted to his study. The room was mellow in colour and full of books, and stained with long years of tobacco smoke. It contained works of art — little marble copies of Praxiteles — his "Faun" and the "Cnidian Venus" — the "Penseroso" of Michael Angelo, and a copy in bronze of the famous "Mercury," from Naples.

Before his desk sat Dr. Carbonell, an old man with clear-cut features and pale complexion. He was of the colour of his smoke-stained marbles — a hue of old ivory. But his eyes were bright and blue behind his big spectacles in their tortoiseshell frame. On his head was a black silk cap, for he was quite bald. Of average height, he was thin in person, but very upright for an old man. He wore a black frock coat, grey trousers and purple slippers. His tie was of black satin, and in it appeared a breast-pin

fashioned of flint — an arrowhead of neolithic man. Dr. Carbonell pushed away his papers, took up a pipe with his left hand and greeted Emma with his right. Then he shook hands with Billy, lighted his pipe, and bade the visitors be seated.

“What have you been up to now, William?” he asked.

“Sleeping in damp hay,” said the invalid. “At least it was dry when we retired; but it came on to rain while we slept. I’m barking like a dog, and I believe I’m going to have appendicitis. And if I am, I’d better know it.”

“Everything’s appendicitis now,” said Emma. “Where does it come from, Doctor?”

The old practitioner was one of Colchester’s heroes — famous and admired. There were whispers that the freedom of the borough was to be presented to him in consideration of his lifelong labours for the township. His activities ranged over many interests. He was a bachelor and alone in the world; but his urbanity, generosity, and learning made him many friends. Only one disability led Colchester to view him with uneasiness: he was a Free Thinker. But his own views he never obtruded unless challenged to do so; then he did not hesitate to speak plainly.

He was a travelled man, and his experience ranged over Europe. Locomotion and Celtic pottery he claimed for his special subjects. He had ridden in Brunel’s pneumatic railway and had flown in an aeroplane.

“Appendicitis is a thing of yesterday, Emma,” he said. “It came in with boracic acid and there’s a close link between them. I shan’t live to see it established, and my chemistry days are over, though if I were a young man, I’d set myself to the problem and prove I’m right. In my youth, the microscope had no part in therapeutics and the germ theory for practical purposes did not exist. I’ve cut off many a leg and arm without anæsthetic, or anti-septic either, so you may judge I date back to the early Victorians. And very good times, too. We were more

sober-minded then, and had much better ideas of the significance of pleasure and the value of a holiday."

"We're the Lord's children, and a father likes to see his little ones playing," said William. "And you're my side and always have been, Doc."

"I'm not your side at all. For a man to lead your life is a social scandal."

"It's a protest," explained Billy. "If my brother had been a possible person, I should have lived differently; but my better nature rose at his dreadful goodness from the first. I'm a saint compared to him. What d'you think he said not ten minutes ago? Told me to go in the hospital!"

"There's an ancient Roman joke, that when a wine-bibber hanged himself the people said, 'There hangs a wine-skin, not a man'; and when we bury you, we shall write on your grave, 'Here lies a beer-barrel.' That'll be the end of you, if you don't mend."

"A whisky-barrel, more like, poor darling," said Emma.

William took off his coat and shirt and submitted to an examination.

"You might save yourself even now," declared the physician, tapping the patient's hairy chest with the end of his stethoscope. "There's no disease, only a general weakness and *malaise* from insufficient food and bad clothing. You're tough enough, thanks to living in the open air. If you'd lead a decent life and drop the drink, you might be a respectable member of society in six months."

"Game's not worth the candle," said William. "I don't want to live to be a hundred, like you're going to be. When first Emma joined me, she'd got a foggy idea that we'd save each other. Hadn't you, Emma? But when I showed her what 'salvation' meant, her fine siprit rose against it."

William helped himself from an open tobacco pouch on Dr. Carbonell's desk. Then he handed it to Emma, who also filled her pipe.

The doctor was writing.

"I'm giving him some physic and some gargle; and mind he uses it, Emma," he said.

"A pity you never found a woman such as this to be your handmaiden and the joy of your life, Doc," said Billy, waving his hand towards Miss Darcy.

"He had a mind above us females," said Emma. "He didn't want us for his pastime, because he was always after books and curiosities."

"There's no curiosity that's a patch on a woman," declared William, "and, complete as he thinks himself, Doc would have been much more complete if he'd added a live one to his collection."

"And how the mischief d'you know he didn't?" asked Emma. "It ain't every man and woman that hops about together, like a pair of bullfinches, same as you and me do. Of course the married ones do it — to save their faces so often as not. But because a man haven't got a woman on his arm in the street, or at the foot of his table at home, it don't follow he haven't got one in his heart."

The old physician finished, blotted the prescription, and handed it to Emma.

"And I wish you'd tell Billy that he must sleep in housen and not under the stars no more," said she. "He'll never get right, not even with your medicine, if he doesn't care."

"Are you sleeping under hedges now?"

"Not for the minute. We are along with my brother, Tom Darcy, him that's a sailor on the Oyster Company's *Peewit*. He's got a very nice house at Brittlesea, and he ought to understand our ways, being a bit of a gipsy, of course, same as me. But William's so restive. He says he can't sleep under a ceiling, because he always fears 'twill fall atop of him — silliness, I call it."

"What I want," said Billy, "is nothing more nor less than a rest cure."

He winked at Emma, for he knew Carbonell felt rather strongly on the subject.

"You're trying to pull my leg, William, but you won't," the doctor said. "A work cure's what you want, my friend. If we gave our fools hard labour as well as our knaves — but nothing can be done until we make idleness a crime against the State and waste of time an indictable offence."

"I hope I may not be spared to see it," said William, "for it would mean the triumph of everything that's busy and small and mean and peddling. It would mean that worms like my brother had conquered the world, and that the free spirits, like me, had no place left for the sole of their feet."

"Your brother's a good man. You're not."

"Good for what? You can't tell me — nobody can tell me; and none knows better than you that he's tinkling brass and as empty as a drum."

"You'll never make me despise your brother, William. I respect him, and if he hasn't got the art to win people, that's his misfortune, not his fault. Now be off. Get this made up, Emma Darcy, and see he uses it."

Dr. Carbonell gave Emma the prescription and five shillings with it.

"I'd do as much for you if the cases were reversed," said Billy; "and as to work, don't think it's a prejudice on my part. Some are born to work and love it from their youth up; but such as me are in another category, and the community can drive us and bore us and harry us; but it can't make us work."

"You did work once in the dim past," said Dr. Carbonell.

"As a freeman of Brittlesea, I did a bit of work on the water," admitted William.

"You can't do better than try it again, then."

"When the oysters come in season," suggested Emma. "There's always easy work going then, and you never mind getting up in the early morning."

"If I *had* to get up in the early morning, I should mind

it very much. Why, if my fellow-creatures rose and ordered me, on pain of punishment, to drink two quarts of beer a day, I'd very likely turn teetotaller on the instant. I've got the stuff of martyrs in me — if it was worth while."

"Come, my handsome," said Emma to Billy. "We've took up enough of the doctor's time, and may God send a blessing on the noble creature, I'm sure."

Then they left him.

CHAPTER VII

ON THE PEEWIT

Mrs. HEMPSON was a practical widow of middle age, and when her son returned from his costly failure in China empty-handed, she supported him under his reverse and sought means to tide herself over the period during which he was out of work.

She explained the situation to Aveline when the artist went to see Mrs. Hempson's two spare rooms.

"Every little helps," she said. "My son, Andrew, has been under the weather of late and had bad fortune. He thinks to enlist, but there's no immediate call for him to do so, though if this misbegotten war goes on much longer, no doubt he will join up. And meanwhile I'm very glad to let my two spare rooms."

They suited the new-comer well enough, and now she had settled in and was painting steadily. But Aveline quickly learned that her pictures would not keep her. The times were bad for art, and her work made no appeal to Colchester. Thanks to Mistley's good offices, friendly stationers and a picture dealer were willing to display the pictures, but those of the inhabitants who claimed regard for such things held Aveline's productions unfinished. She sold the drawing of Mr. Ambrose's lily pond, and the purchaser was Mrs. Ambrose, who extolled the picture and desired Aveline's acquaintance; but as yet she had not met her patron.

And now, having put an advertisement into a local journal, she hoped for a pupil or two.

Peter Mistley was gone to Devonshire, and she found that he made a little gap in her life already. She discov-

ered herself often thinking about him, and she was pleased when an unexpected letter came from him. There was little in it save a long description of the garden upon which he found himself engaged; but he asked her a question and said that he would be infinitely obliged to her if she could go to the water gardens at "Colneside" and tell him the order of things at a certain point in them. "I ought to know it by heart," he wrote, "but it happens that I forget just what I want to remember. Nobody at the nursery can tell me exactly what I want to know as well as you could, so I venture to ask this favour." He praised Devonshire and hoped that she was selling her pictures. There was nothing more in the note, yet to Aveline it seemed inspired with that unconscious intimacy ever existing between artist and artist.

She did his bidding and made a little drawing of the place he wanted — a sketch in his own manner, indicating the plants. With the picture she sent a letter saying that Colchester connoisseurs were not exactly tumbling over each other to buy her pictures, but that she lived in hope and was very busy and more in love with Essex than ever.

Then came the day with Margery Mayhew, and Aveline put temporary cares from her mind very willingly and gave herself to her friend. She had a child's power of throwing herself into the present hour, to the obliteration of past and future; she also had a child's faith in the great to-morrows. They were going to Brightlingsea to visit the estuary with Margery's uncle, Mr. Samuel Mushet.

Brightlingsea is a busy hamlet, from whose main street of little houses and little shops spread arteries to east and west. Southward a three-cornered green terminates the township, and northward, nigh the railway station, are other open spaces and plantations of trees. The place grows steadily, and new buildings rise and thrust forward through its flowery skirts to the market gardens beyond. But at the Hard beats the pulse of Brightlingsea, where her freemen pursue their business ashore and afloat.

The tide was at ebb when Aveline and Margery reached the pier, and the mud-coloured waters were swept by a strong and stormy wind. The estuary opened west, then wound away to the south round a low bank crowned by a Martello tower. Green meadows ran along this region, and between it and the Hard there lay half a hundred vessels — oyster dredgers, smacks and ketches, a steam pin-nace or two, and a little, beamy paddle-boat, the *Peewit*, to which the women were bound. She rode two hundred yards from shore, and Margery signalled to her with a white handkerchief. Along the shore to right and left rose a wilderness of wooden shanties and slips for vessels. Ships' chandlers and fish supplies, boat builders and marine stores clustered together, and the reek of fish and tarred hemp was brushed to Aveline's nostrils. These places at high tide stood with their steps submerged, while dotted amongst them rose the masts and cordage of dismantled vessels and many a yacht, high and dry, with naked sticks and body wrapped in tarpaulin. For the war had shut down on sport, and the vessels of pleasure now in commission were doing the country's work.

Away over Mersea Isle to the westward swept up a summer storm. Darker it grew with a noble welter of thunder-clouds piled to the zenith and gashed with white and crooked lightning. Earth and water seemed to shrink to a mere insignificant huddle beneath the immensity of the clouds. Their billows rolled out in white and grey above the purple beneath; and then the storm climbed upwards to smother the loftier strata, and great fans and moving arms of light broke the darkness and waved across it wild signals from the foundered sun. Half a gale of wind, freshening for five minutes to a whole gale, burst on Brightlingsea, and sent the life of the Hard flying to cover. Veils of heavy rain softened the hard gloom of the sky; thunder rattled, and a crash of hail beat on the corrugated iron of the shanties. The waters of the estuary were roughed, and a sudden sea set the anchored vessels, great and

small, rolling and dancing. One laden, open boat, lying unmanned and moored to a larger, took a grey sea over her weather bow, shuddered, and sank. Thin shouts and the bob of hurrying heads came from the parent ketch; but their boat was gone, and only a pair of oars and a fish-box danced where she had ridden. Smoke flew from the steamers, and a dozen sailing craft, heeling to the wind, came up with crackling canvas bows on to the squall. But fifty dun-coloured, lumpish monsters, on which stood or sat some hundreds of dun-coloured men, troubled not at the weather. The air-tight, iron things danced to the sudden seas, and their crews shouted and toiled at their endless business of making and unmaking. For they were military pontoons, and the Royal Engineers from England's newly made armies came daily to the waters to learn the business of bridging estuary and river. Big men they were — some in jack boots, some in canvas and indiarubber slippers — and they toiled daily half in the tide and half out of it, wet as water voles, and as indifferent to wind and weather. Stolidly they learned their business: a corps composed from commanding officer to "sapper" of men specially trained. They were mostly fitters or carpenters by trade.

Few of the dark, tanned faces that Aveline studied were intellectual, but most were intelligent. The strength and size of the men chiefly impressed her. The greater number had no visible thought beyond the business of the minute — the steering and manipulating of their heavy craft, the linking and unlinking of the bridges; but here and there among them and the young officers directing them, the artist saw a face with fire and spirit and imagination mirrored therein.

"They are dreaming of doing their work again on the Rhine," she said to Margery.

"I hope there are dry clothes and hot dinners waiting for them ashore," answered the other.

Soon the weather brightened and a drift of sunlit cloud

flung a silvery dance of brightness over the water and reflected itself upon sand and stone. The people crept out again — first ragamuffins, to play with the weed and sea life at water's edge, then the fishermen and longshore folk. A sentry, with glittering bayonet, tramped up and down before the pontoon landing-places; but now he was relieved and a dry lad took his place. The wet man's khaki had turned to dull brown. Aloft the sky gaped into great patches of blue; the sun shone on the reeking world and the wind fell suddenly. A steam rose above the Hard and crept in little curls over the beach.

"Now they'll come for us," said Margery; and by the time they had returned to the pier-head, a boat pulled by a solitary rower danced out from the side of the *Peewit* and soon ran alongside the jetty.

A young, fair man, in a tarpaulin hat, jack boots and a blue jersey, rowed it, and Margery welcomed him.

"Good-morning, Teddy," she said, then turned to Aveline and introduced the sailor.

"This is my cousin, Teddy Mushet — the son of Uncle Samuel on the *Peewit*," she explained.

"Squally weather, but you ladies will be all right aboard," declared Teddy.

He was a big fellow with broad shoulders, a large, simple face, and gentle grey eyes.

He spread his jacket inside out for them to sit upon, then rowed, with a strong, slow stroke, away and soon reached the *Peewit*. The little steamer had cast off and was already moving when they came alongside. Hands were extended to the women, and they found themselves in a wide deck aft, while the boat went astern to the length of her painter and rolled along after them in the white wake of the steamer.

The *Peewit* churned her way through the harbour, then got clear of the shipping and headed round the mud flats and the Martello tower towards East Mersea.

There were a dozen men upon her and Margery knew half of them. She greeted first the skipper of the little steamer.

"Good-morning, Mr. Rebow," she said. "This is Mrs. Brown; who wants to see the *Peewit* and hear about the oysters."

Saul Rebow valued himself on his command. He was very thin, very tall, and very hairy. He had a high-pitched voice, and of his face, so clothed was it in rough, grey hair, that one saw little but his brown eyes and round, heavy nose.

Behind his back the master of the *Peewit* was called "Old Tell-yer-fer-why," owing to a didactic habit of giving reasons for everything. He argued, justly, that nought happened without a reason; but he went beyond this safe ground and himself claimed perilous heights of knowledge that solved most human problems.

"We shall open your eyes, Mrs. Brown," he said, "and show you what's under the water and what's above it."

"I've seen what's above it already," declared the visitor. "Never was such a glorious sky."

"Yes — owing to the thunder in the elements," said Mr. Rebow. "When there's electricity in the air, you see the clouds drawn together by the electric fluid; and when they touch, there's a great volume of heat given off, and heat produces both noise and light, so you get the lightning first and the thunder afterwards."

Margery's uncle was a different type of man. He greeted the girl affectionately, kissed her, and then wiping his hands on a lump of waste, saluted Aveline. He was clad in a close suit of brown drill, buttoned up to his neck, and he resembled his brother, the gardener, though of much smaller build. His beard was a grizzled red, and his heavy eyebrows hung over reddish-grey eyes. His nose was hooked and his expression kindly. Mr. Mushet's little engine-room lay amidships, and from it an iron lad-

der descended to the stokehole. On either side, under the paddle-boxes, a red wheel beat the sea, and overhead was Mr. Rebow's perch, where he stood at his helm.

"A squally day and plenty of rain to follow," said Samuel Mushet. "How's Uncle Gregory, Madge?"

"He's very well and sent you his respects, and I was to know when you're coming with Aunt Nancy for a day with us."

"I'm coming, certainly," said the engineer.

"But you're always coming and never come."

"You must fix it with your aunt. I'm very hopeful to come next month, if it can be done."

"Not sooner?"

"No, for certain. The *Peewit* goes into dry dock in a fortnight's time, and I must be there. Our engines are going to be overhauled."

There came a signal from overhead.

"Now the dredges are going out, so you'd better run aft and see the fun," said Mr. Mushet.

They left him and went to the broad stern of the boat, where six oyster dredges were about to be cast into the water. They were of steel mesh on a wooden beam — the immemorial pattern of the oyster dredge that has changed not through centuries. The *Peewit*, at slow speed, danced a little in the lopping sea. Southerly the grey waters stretched to a sun-flash on the horizon, and to the east, flat Mersea Island lay, clear-cut in shadow and gleam behind the mist of the sea.

The dredges splashed overboard, scratched a hundred yards of sea-bottom and were hauled again. Aveline and Margery stood beside Teddy Mushet and exclaimed as he emptied his net upon the deck. A mass of strange life was tumbled there, and from the shining weed and shell hastened long-legged, green and brown crabs every way as fast as they could scuttle. The lucky ones found channels of escape and fell through them back to sea; some, worthy of the pot, were caught and flung into a pail.

Teddy sorted over his mass, wherein Nature apparently desired to exhibit all the strange things that throve under Colne estuary. There were adult oysters, which he threw aside, and then came matted fingers of a white, squirting weed, with other seaweeds ambre and green and olive.

"Cat-tail, we call that," said Teddy. "We like to see it, because where that does well, the oysters do well, too."

There emerged also the deadly "five-fingers," a big starfish which preys on the oysters; a sea hedgehog, the enemy of the infant oysters; and yet another foe — the tingle whelk — with a hirsute shell and an evil habit of boring into the oyster and devouring it.

"All this dead cockle-shell is called 'culch,'" said Teddy. "It's brought here from other places and piled up on the saltings to get dry and sweet; then we shovel it into the sea over the layering grounds, so that when the spat goes down, it finds good foothold. The spat's the oyster spawn; we're on the look-out for this year's spat now, and hope it will be good. These are young oysters — a year or more old."

He showed them splendid clusters of brood oysters clinging to the culch. They bunched out upon it, as fungus spreads from a dying tree. Each infant oyster was silver-bright and any size from a florin to a shilling — their lustrous nacre as yet unstained.

Mr. Rebow surrendered the wheel to his mate and came aft. In his hand he carried a large magnifying glass.

"Are you come for learning, or for fun?" he asked the girls.

"For ——" began Aveline; but Margery, who knew Mr. Rebow, cut her short.

"For learning, Captain Rebow," she said.

"Then I can tell you as much as your heads can hold for the minute," he said. "This is the time for the spat, and we're on the look-out for it. Given sea temperature

of sixty-four degrees in early spring, we've a right to hope for good spat. But the oyster's worst enemy is cold. Now the multitudes of the spat, every speck of which is a fertilised egg of the oyster, are due. The oyster's 'white sick' first, as we say, then 'black sick'; then the spat is given off in clouds by the oysters, and it floats and moves about briskly in the water for a time; but, as the mantle develops, each speck sinks down on to the sea-bottom upon the dead shell we've spread there; and they fasten on by their heels and never move again, till the dredge moves them."

"What a dull life," suggested Aveline.

Mr. Rebow stared at her.

"You speak as a human," he said. "Their lives ain't more dull to them than yours is to you."

"What with the tingles, and five-fingered starfish, and sea hedgehogs, I suppose they're not," she admitted.

"This is a pocket lens," continued the skipper, "and now skilled eyes looking on the culch can see among the spawn of other creatures — American limpets and whelks and such-like — the native oysters not so big as a pin's head yet."

"All settling down to the business of growing into good oysters," said Aveline.

"Exactly so."

He examined some shell and presently showed them spat. "The spat's falling," he said.

"Our enemy here," he went on, "is the Slipper limpet — these ugly, yellow creatures with their shells all massed in lumps. They'd smother the oysters and fill the whole estuary if we didn't fight 'em every hour of every day. They breed like the pestilence, and we destroy thousands of tons in a year. I can remember a time when there wasn't a limpet here. Lord knows where they came from — America in my opinion. It was like the enemy sowing tares by night."

Captain Rebow continued his search for spat, while

the men went roughly through their heaps, broke off and separated the clusters of oysters, set aside the limpet and soon threw back the debris to the sea. Then the trawls went down again, and in Teddy's next haul there came a twelve-fingered starfish, a splash of rare colour amid the browns and greys and greens. It was as brilliant as a cock's wattle.

"We call them 'roses,'" said Teddy, "and they do no harm. And that's a 'Queen,'" he added, handing Aveline a dainty little scallop shell. "They are good to eat, but rare. You mightn't catch a dozen in a day."

They admired much that was beautiful, and shuddered at certain manifestations of marine life that, on their values, appeared hideous, but were only strange.

With hand-boards, or "sheirds," Teddy presently flung back to sea the immature oysters and debris from his trawl. But the "five-fingered jacks," wicked tingles and sea hedgehogs he crushed and destroyed, before returning their corpses to the water.

"You kill the beautiful things and let the fat, ugly oysters go on living," said Aveline.

Teddy laughed.

"The oysters are our friends," he explained, "and it's our business to kill their enemies when we catch 'em."

Then Aveline grew weary of the fishing and turned to the sky again, while Margery spoke to another man.

He was dark, with a close, black beard, a brown skin, and black, curly hair. His eyes were small and bright, and he wore little gold rings in his ears, and round his throat a handkerchief, that had once been red, but was now weathered to pale pink.

"How are you, Mr. Darcy?" asked Margery, and he nodded and wished her good-morning.

"I'm going on all right," he said, "as I always do, for that matter; but I'm under the weather for the minute owing to family reasons. In fact, my sister Emma and Billy Ambrose are along with me for the present."

None at Colchester had missed the fame of Emma and William.

"I expect they're rather trying," said Margery.

"Emma's all right — so far as such a godless woman can be. It might be the salvation of her if she left him; but she would no more leave him than the light leaves the moon. He brings us all under his command, William do. 'Tis no good raging at the man."

"This is Mr. Thomas Darcy," said Margery to Aveline, who had come back to earth from sky again. "He's the brother of poor Emma — you know."

They talked at intervals while the dredges were down. Aveline was full of ideas for Emma; but they were vain.

"They're two in one and one in two, you may say," declared Darcy, "far more than most properly married people, in fact. They hate law and order. Emma was always a roamer before she met him. She belonged to the gipsies by birth, you may say, and though my family had given up their ways and lived in houses for generations, Emma was a 'come back,' and run away from school at twelve."

A ketch steered alongside presently and, in another squall of rain, twenty heavy bags of oysters were transferred from her to the steamer. Then the *Peewit* turned north and made for Pyefleet Creek.

"We're off to the fattening grounds now," explained Teddy Mushet, when the rain had passed and the visitors emerged from the shelter of the engine-room.

"All these full-sized ware¹ we've caught are going to be flung overboard again into the creek, and they'll stay and grow fat for two months or more before the season opens. But ——"

He stopped as Mr. Rebow approached.

"This is Pyefleet Creek, ladies," began the captain, "and yonder lies Peewit Island, where you see a building

¹ *Ware*, full-grown oysters.

rise up on the flats. That's the Company's island and the Company's packing sheds; and the oyster parcs are there, where the oysters are stored day by day in the season. Nothing doing now; but a busy place when we begin to market. Now we're in the fattening grounds, and under our keel there's millions of fine natives lying thick as the sand on the shore."

The saltings spread to right and left, and Aveline noticed how the sunlight polished the water and frosted the mud. But mud and water were of the same colour, though of different surface texture. The low mud banks, scooped out by the tides, hung over, like solid waves that would not break and tumble; and for foam along their crests ran seafaring plants — dim orache and sea asters and sea lavender, that now began to light the saltings, with rush and broken sedges and other weeds of the country that had stolen here and suffered a sea change in flower and leaf. The glasswort grew on spaces submerged at high tide. Stiff and sprightly its tiny forests sprang from the mud. Mr. Rebow called it "samphire" and held it a valuable vegetable. He explained its virtues both boiled and pickled.

"I picked a good bunch for you yesterday," said Teddy to his cousin. "It's home, waiting for you."

Margery thanked him.

"Uncle Gregory's very fond of it," she said.

The oysters were flung into the creek broadcast with spades, and the deck of the *Peewit* sluiced and cleansed. Then, the morning's work ended, she headed for home, while Margery chatted with Captain Rebow and Aveline stood aft alone and rejoiced in the low horizons, the green meadows and elms of Mersea Island, and the receding mud flats swept by light and shadow amid the steel-bright waters of distance.

"I'll wager you young women are hungry now," said the engineer when they landed, and both declared that they were.

CHAPTER VIII

THE WAX-WING

QUAKER influences may be marked in many a home of East Essex. It is a county famous for Bloody Mary's martyrs and savouring of the Roundheads to this day. Examine the libraries and the works are found to be mostly religious. It was so in the dwelling of Samuel Mushet, and Nancy, his wife, declared herself still a Quaker. She spoke to Aveline while the men washed and made ready for dinner.

Nancy was a small, dark, dapper woman, well preserved for her fifty years. She had a little tip-tilted nose, and the fascinating, but unclassical mouth that often accompanies that feature.

"You're looking at my books I see, Mrs. Brown," she said. "Here's Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and John Milton and the *Book of Martyrs*, and, for light reading I've several works of travel in the Holy Land. We've got Shakespeare, too: that's my husband's book. Bunyan's my man."

They spoke of names at dinner, and Mr. Mushet declared that his own appellation had once been very different.

"I'm told by my brother, who got it out of Mr. Ambrose, at 'Colneside,' that Mushet was Mont-fitchet once, and that the race was very high and mighty in Essex long ago. But for my part you can't be too simple in such matters. Mont-fitchet is a fantastic sort of a name, in my opinion — almost something godless to it, you might say. Mushet is straightforward, and Mushet means

Essex to the understanding mind, but Mont-fitchet means nothing."

"I expect it means a good deal, if you looked it up," said Aveline.

"I have," said Nancy, "and it means to them so called in the past, money and lands and a peck of troublesome adventures. The high people can't live quietly and jog along like us. They must be doing and stirring."

"They taste life," said Aveline.

But Mr. Mushet grunted.

"They taste a lot of things," he said, "such a lot, in fact, that a time comes when they've got no more use for food as food, or life as life. They want all life to be an adventure, and don't know what's going to happen to 'em in a month's time more than we know what the weather's going to be."

They ate very heartily. Aveline dishonestly admired the decoration of the room. It consisted of stuffed birds in glass cases.

"They're held a very good collection, and all fell to my father's gun," explained Mrs. Mushet. "He was a great sportsman and a man who understood the hidden ways of birds. That's a wax-wing you're looking at now. An amazingly rare creature. My father always hoped he'd be spared to shoot one. And he was. It came to his gun in his seventieth year."

She turned, where Teddy Mushet sat very silent beside her, eating his dinner with his mouth and eating Margery with his eyes.

"Tell the story of grandfather and the wax-wing, Ted. 'Tis a very good tale. And Margery will help me change the plates."

"My grandfather never let his work come between him and a bit of shooting by all accounts," began Teddy; "and he loved the things he shot, and if they was worth it, he'd stuff them to the life, as you can see. And one day there came a wax-wing to the woods where grand-

father worked, out away by the church. And an understanding man mentioned it in the bar of the 'King's Head.' A gamekeeper he was, and a friend of my grandfather's; and grandfather pricked his ears. 'Good alive!' said grandfather, 'you don't mean it, George?' And George, who knew every bird that flies, swore he'd seen the creature twice. And in the bar also was grandfather's great and bitter rival — an old, lame tally-man, called Noah Pullen.

"That's a master-bit of news, sure enough — if it's true," said old Noah. Then they left it at that, and the fun began, because both these old boys put everything else from them from that moment and only lived to slay the wax-wing. Early and late they went about to shoot it. And then came a morning — the greatest in his life, as he always said — when my grandfather dropped the wax-wing; and never, since the day he shot a hoopoe, twenty years earlier in his life, did he rejoice like he did then. And going out of the woods to his breakfast, who should hobble along but old Noah with his fowling-piece? He was suspicious like; but grandfather set him at his ease. 'Did you hear gun-fire?' asked Noah. 'Surely I did,' answered grandfather. 'Twas George over to Squire Bateman's.' And then he asks t'other old chap a question. 'Haven't seen nothing of this wax-wing they tell about, have you, Pullen?' 'No — and shan't,' says Noah; 'they tell all the lies they can think of in Brittlesea. There never was a wax-wing in the Tendring Hundred and there never will be!' A fortnight later grandfather asked old Noah to come in the house and have a drink and a game of 'shove-halfpenny,' and Noah Pullen went; and the first thing he see staring at him was the wax-wing, stuffed and smart as life in that very case you're looking at now. They often chuckled at it afterwards, but Noah didn't chuckle at the time. In fact, he was sore for a good bit, and even went so far as to say the bird wasn't a wax-wing, though too well he knew it was."

They laughed over their pudding and, finding the guest

very sympathetic, Nancy Mushet grew friendly and more personal. The talk was of punctuality, and Mrs. Mushet declared her husband the least punctual person in the world.

"Though not as bad as his father before him, I grant," she said.

"My nature is to be behind time," confessed Samuel, "but if you have to do with machinery and steam, as I have, then the fault is largely cured. Steam waits for no man, nor yet does tide."

"Where you're servant, you're punctual enough, I grant," admitted Nancy; "but not where you're master. Nothing to your old father, however."

"He missed pretty well all he could in his life," admitted Mr. Mushet. "He missed a legacy, and he missed the woman he wanted to marry most, and he missed his market three days a week, and he missed his meals, and he missed everything but bad luck — born under a bad star you might say. Never went out of Brittlesea in his life, so far as I remember. He was going to Colchester once; but he missed the train and couldn't work up energy enough to try again. He didn't miss Heaven, however, for a better man never walked, though so belated."

They spoke of Gregory and his house.

"There's Flemish blood in us," explained Samuel. "You'll find a lot of it in these parts, and it came over when we traded a good deal in a small way with the Low Countries and Holland. And it's took the form of pride and love of property in my brother. I tell him he's a Dutchman. He works for plants and I work for oysters, and I say my work is above his, because an oyster is higher than a plant, and he says it ain't. In fact, he'd put a plant higher than an oyster, and that's outrageous."

"For beauty, perhaps," said Aveline.

"What's more beautiful than an oyster, inside and out? A fine oyster, with its fringe of new-built shell, can't be beat for beauty to the trained eye, and when you open

'em, what flower has got petals so beautiful as mother-of-pearl? ”

Mrs. Mushet looked uneasy.

“ You'll vex Mrs. Brown, I shouldn't wonder,” she said.

“ Certainly not,” he answered. “ I'm only telling her that an oyster is a higher creation than a cucumber, and nobody that ever I met but Gregory denies it. But he's narrowed his outlook by remaining a bachelor. He's cut himself off from any voice in the next generation, which ought to have been his rightful business.”

Mr. Mushet looked at the stalwart and fair Teddy as he spoke, and so did Mrs. Mushet. Fired by the work of the pontoons, the boy was going to join the Engineers, and his mother, with her whole heart and soul, resented as an outrage the necessity that called him. Her Quaker blood rose passionately against the thought that any child of hers should even learn how to fight.

Silence fell, and Margery knew and Aveline guessed at the thoughts in the parents' minds. His niece spoke to Samuel.

“ Well, you'll be coming to see us soon, I do hope. Uncle Gregory told me a lot of times to make you name the day. And poor old Mr. Pettikin in the gardens — he's always asking after you.”

“ I'll come — next month as likely as not — and your aunt also, and Ted, if he's here.”

“ I shan't be,” said Teddy; “ and if you're going to catch the train, you ought to be on the way, Madge.”

They started five minutes later, and young Mushet, carrying a great bunch of green “ samphire,” walked with them to the station.

The last thing that Aveline noted was the boy's round, wistful face fixed humbly on her friend.

CHAPTER IX

THE DINNER-PARTY

MR. PARKYN AMBROSE was travelling homeward in his motor-car, and beside him sat Geoffrey Seabrook. The car also contained a large bunch of flowers, wrapped in tissue paper, and a suit-case.

The day of the dinner-party at Mersea Island had come, and Mr. Ambrose was driving the draughtsman home. Seabrook appeared much impressed with this kindness and now reiterated his thanks.

"It's uncommonly good of you to give me a lift," he said.

In his heavy, condescending voice the master of "Colneside" replied:

"Not at all, my dear fellow. The obligation is ours. Other guests come to talk; you give us the pleasure of song, which is often far better."

"Who dine with you, if I may ask?"

"Just a little, quiet party — hardly a dinner. I am against anything like an entertainment while the nation is at war. My old friend, Mr. Odington, the rose-grower, and his wife, a Mrs. Chaffe and her daughter, Dr. Carbonell and yourself — these are our guests. You stay the night at the Manor House and return with me to-morrow."

"It's more than kind and I hope no inconvenience."

"Far from it, I assure you. You had better draw up the glass on your side. The rain is coming in."

The car splashed and snorted through the summer rain to Mersea Island, where it lay embowered in elms and rich farmlands between the estuaries of Blackwater and Colne.

By a causeway it is approached from the mainland, and this neck, which crosses Pyefleet Creek, is called the Strood — a Roman road of old time. Once upon the island the way forked, and the car of Mr. Ambrose took the right hand branch for West Mersea, a fishing hamlet, nigh which he dwelt. It is a place of ancient fame, for Briton, Saxon and Roman have all left their mark upon it. Mr. Ambrose preserved in his garden fragments of venerable fortifications and some details of Roman tessellated pavement; while to the church he also took friends interested in such matters. It was a Norman building of flint and stone, brightened with Roman brick. South of it stood the Manor House, where Mr. Ambrose dwelt, and westerly stretched the village — a place very picturesque, full of pleasant, red-roofed cottages lifted above the Blackwater and the mud flats.

Mrs. Ambrose welcomed her husband and the visitor.

"Why! What an inspiration!" she said at sight of the flowers. "I am going to wear white to-night."

Seabrook had brought a large bunch of very dark, velvety, crimson carnations.

They drank tea, and, the weather clearing, all three of them walked out afterwards. The gardens sloped to the sea and below them a sandy beach extended. Helena ran and played with two white Pomeranian dogs, while Mr. Ambrose perambulated with the guest.

"My wife is the very impersonification of youth," declared Parkyn; "but you must not think she lives for pleasure."

"They say at the hospital that she helps the men to get well and has a marvellous instinct to brighten up the wounded soldiers."

Mr. Seabrook invented this pleasant picture, for nobody had said it, or thought it. But the husband was gratified.

"Woman's work — ministering angels 'when pain and anguish wring the brow.' They were not exactly ministering angels who broke into Kew Gardens last year, how-

ever, and destroyed many valuable specimens of the orchid family. But I think the war has sobered them and awakened their purer and loftier feelings."

Mr. Seabrook was pleased to hear it.

"I always respect and venerate woman," he said.

"Go on doing so, my good fellow," advised Mr. Ambrose. "If they lose our respect and veneration, what else have they? Nothing but to declare a sex war. And that is contrary to nature, therefore it cannot happen."

Upon this great verity returned Mrs. Ambrose, breathless, as a gong sounded from the house.

"The dressing gong — we must return," said Mr. Ambrose.

On their way back, Helena asked a question of Seabrook.

"Are you going to sing at our Red Cross Concert?"

"I shall be proud to if I am at Colchester. I go to the North shortly."

"Concerning General Sir David Appleyard's garden, I had a singular letter to-day," declared Mr. Ambrose. "So far as I can understand him, he wants a military garden."

His wife laughed.

"How ridiculous!" she said.

"If he wants forts and redoubts and salients and all that sort of thing, I shan't be able to help him, I fear."

"Your tact will not fail you," prophesied Parkyn. "Humour him. If a man wants a garden suggestive of military operations, no doubt such a garden can be created."

"It's one's privilege and pleasure — and business to catch a client's spirit and reflect it back to him if possible."

"I wish our mutual friend, Mistley, could hear you," answered Mr. Ambrose. "Mistley is a genius, but, like all geniuses, too eager to impose his ideals and too impatient of other people's ideas."

They went in then, and at five minutes to the dinner hour, Seabrook entered the drawing-room in very perfect evening raiment. He brought down his music with him. The room was empty, and he turned to a looking-glass and gave his tie and his hair a touch with a light, quick hand, as a woman does.

Then Parkyn Ambrose and his wife appeared, and a few moments later the guests arrived. Mrs. Chaffe and her daughter lived near, while Dr. Carbonell had accepted the offer of the Odingtons and come with them in their motor-car from Colchester.

"There is one great charm about the automobile: it extends one's radius and enables us to enlarge the circle of our friends," said Mr. Ambrose, after he had asked a blessing. He took in Mrs. Odington, while to the lot of Mr. Odington fell Helena. Dr. Carbonell sat at the left hand of Mrs. Chaffe and Seabrook on the left of Miss Chaffe. She was a good-natured creature, who laughed at everything, and her moon face beamed out from a cloud of towy hair, ill done. Mr. Odington — a little man with a quick way of turning his head to the right and left, like a stoat, had never room in his mind for more than one idea at a time. He admitted this, and when Mrs. Ambrose discovered that the idea for that evening was to be the horticultural value of bacteria in peat, she wavered more and more to her right-hand neighbour, the doctor. Then Mr. Odington made a bacterial attack on Miss Chaffe, who sat on his left, and such was her softness of heart that, once entangled in the subject, she remained a listener, frightened to escape back to Geoffrey Seabrook. He, for his part, thus released, discussed music with Mrs. Odington, who was understood to know something about it. But he found that the subject rendered Mrs. Odington uneasy.

"Before I married," said Mrs. Odington, "I lived for music, and sang in the choir at the Handel Festival on two occasions."

"Do you still sing?" asked Geoffrey.

"Only to my husband."

"How greedy of him."

"No, it is kind of him. My voice is not what it was and could give other people no pleasure; but a woman's voice is like her beauty in the ear of one who loves her from the past."

"I'm sure you are far too young to be so sentimental," said Mr. Seabrook, and the lady, whose age was fifty-seven, approved of him.

At a moment when the young man was making a tactful, but futile, effort to rescue Miss Chaffe from the bacteria, Mrs. Odington, under her breath, praised him to Mr. Ambrose.

"You are right; he is a high-minded, worthy fellow — quite a young man worth cultivating," said Parkyn.

The host was old-fashioned and practised old fashions. He caught Mr. Odington's eye and took wine with him. He breathed a spirit of amiable platitude.

The meal was neither elaborate nor lengthy.

As the ladies left the dining-room, Mrs. Ambrose said, "Don't be long."

But Dr. Carbonell loved a good cigar, and though Parkyn Ambrose was no smoker, he never criticised the habit in others. The men assembled round Ambrose, and the rose-grower asked his host his candid opinion concerning bacterialised peat in the garden.

"My own feeling is to fight novelty," said Mr. Odington. "There is far too much novelty in the world nowadays, and people often accept a new thing just because it is new."

"Not seldom at the expense of something that is better, though older," declared Mr. Ambrose. "Yes, Odington, I agree with you: this rush for novelty is not a good sign of the times."

"In the past, truth had to fight for acceptance and a new thing was always suspect," said Dr. Carbonell. "Our fore-fathers were more conservative than we are, and

looked into new truths very sharply — to see that they didn't clash with old truths. A new truth had to fight tooth and nail to get established."

"Yet what commonplaces some of the great fundamental facts are to-day," observed Seabrook, and the old doctor quoted poetry.

"No truth is ere so simple but of old
It scarce could win men's credence, nor is aught
So great, so wondrous in its majesty
But by degrees we cease from wondering."

That's Lucretius — the first and greatest poet of reason — not read enough nowadays. De Quincey said he was mad; but De Quincey thought everybody mad — Shelley, Goethe and all the rest — who had brains enough to demand freedom of thought. That was his charity, poor soul, to declare free thought only a poisonous flower stuck in a madman's hair."

Mr. Ambrose looked uneasy at this challenge; but for the sake of his other guests he felt called upon to take it up.

"We Christians cannot feel satisfied of the sanity of any man who rejects what seems to us so vital," he said. "The Almighty makes our brains according to His own will; but He never shuts the possibility of faith out of them. To some it is easy, to some difficult, to all possible. Faith, I mean. The bent of every brain is God's design. God is a free agent, and nothing curbs His power to make men as He likes and worlds as He likes — for His purposes, of course, not ours."

"You mustn't say that," answered the veteran. "A clergyman would condemn you. There was a pious soul called Vanini, who declared that God desires to have the world as it is, and that if He had wished it better, He would have made it better. What would you have done to such a man?"

Mr. Ambrose fell into the trap.

"I should have said it was a very sensible position to take. The world is getting better, and man, by the grace of God, is working out his own salvation. No doubt this Vanini believed in a good God and trusted the world to Him."

"You're no Christian if you think that. What the Church of Christ did was to tear Vanini's tongue out and burn him alive for daring to suggest that the Almighty was a free agent. You must be careful, Ambrose, or your large-minded views will land you in unorthodoxy."

Seabrook ventured a tilt at the doctor.

"No doubt the principle of evolution comes into religion," he said, "and we Christians accept the Faith in a larger spirit than early Christians used to do. We're more tolerant, and allow more credit to people who think differently."

"You're more tolerant because you've got to be," answered Carbonell. "Science and Reason have won such a measure of recognition under improved education that many of your positions have to be yielded: your front-line trenches are gone. It is a sign of the times that you claim for your faith the principle of evolution — the very principle that your faith most vehemently denied, when first it challenged the world."

"I deprecate these struggles between revealed religion and Science," said Mr. Ambrose.

"They must continue, however," answered the other, "because if the two sides do not find some golden mean, intellectual peace cannot return to earth and we continue a vicious system of party in ethics, as in politics. We must have our metaphysicians, our Bradleys and our Balfours, on the one side, and our physicists, our Haeckels and Lankesters, on the other. There can be no lasting peace yet."

"Would you banish the spiritual out of the world, Doctor?" asked Seabrook.

"Emphatically, no. Though faith in supernatural

things was burned away for me in the athanor of life before you were born, young man, yet I never was without faith and never shall be. I go further than many materialists, and say that there is a precious spiritual standpoint in monism; but it is far removed from everything that we understand by 'revelation.' Rationalism will grant human nature infinite possibilities of expansion and improvement; but she limits the power of individual expansion to the life of the unit; she believes that death must circumscribe it; she declines to think force away from matter, or thought away from brain; just as you, no doubt, would decline to think the edge of a knife away from the knife, or imagine wetness without moisture, or a shadow without substance to cast it. That's where physics, the strong, has to be patient with metaphysics, the weak."

"Tell me what you would do in this case, before we join the ladies," said Parkyn.

"I am about to dismiss a man from my employment — a very good man regarded as a son of the soil; but a very bad man regarded as a member of the community. A leopard cannot change his spots, nor a son of the soil his stains. This man has ruined a girl and he won't marry her. Can I do less than dismiss him, as a good Christian, or a good citizen?"

"As to the individual, you're the best judge. If he's the right age, let him marry her and go to the war. He's only a victim of our social failure, and so is the woman. We fight Nature foolishly, and never see that man must run in double harness with Nature, if he wants to go to his own possible limit. But he won't break himself into that double harness. We're always trying to cheat the tide, we men. Instead of harnessing the hot blood in the veins of youth and the will to live and enjoy — the mightiest dynamic force on the earth — we frustrate it and declare it a danger and a sin. Yes, it is the ultimate, disgraceful sin to obey Nature's loudest, most incessant cry to youth.

Instead of striving to understand that cry, we pit our voice against it and try to shut it down. We're developing society on lines that make it more and more impossible for men to wed young. On the one side is the Church and State shouting to us to increase and multiply, and breed souls for God and bodies for cannon fodder; on the other side a natural dread of children, begot of the increasing difficulties of life and the increasing disabilities under which those labour with a quiver full. But more and more decent people keep down their families for motives purely altruistic, and consider the unborn with such real affection that they do not bear them."

They talked on and Mr. Ambrose watched the doctor's cigar; when it was relinquished, he rose.

"Now let us join the ladies," he said. "Music will soothe our minds after these grave problems."

In the drawing-room, Mrs. Ambrose was already at the piano, at the wish of Mrs. Odington, who talked little and was glad to escape the necessity to talk at all. Helena played with a great deal of manner, but no distinction. She sang also, and had been carefully taught to do all possible with a restricted voice. The older men stood and listened, but Seabrook went forward to turn the pages.

They praised the song, which was of a light and joyous character.

"It's something to be cheered up nowadays," said Mrs. Chaffe. "My girl will sing mournful, heart-breaking stuff, and I say, what's the good?"

"Not much certainly, as *she* sings," whispered Geoffrey Seabrook to Helena, and she showed him by a flash, for his eye only, that she appreciated the jest.

"I can still be happy," said Mrs. Ambrose, replying to Mrs. Chaffe. "A few of us elderly people still cherish the art of being happy; though the young have quite lost it, I fear."

It was a little trick of hers to be quite middle-aged one day and an infant the next; indeed, she could assume both

rôles in the same hour. Children, however, saw through the affectation and it bored them; neither were her elders much impressed when she pretended weight of years.

"Some people never get middle-aged even," declared Mr. Odington.

"We're as old as our temperaments," said Dr. Carbonell.

Nelly Chaffe now sang, and while Seabrook turned the music, Mrs. Odington praised him to Mr. Ambrose.

"What a nice young man he is," she said. "A thorough gentleman, and with very refined feelings."

"And a good Christian also, which is something to a man's credit nowadays," answered Parkyn. "We had a deep discussion when you ladies left us, and against the opinions of Dr. Carbonell, who supports views of a very doubtful character, Seabrook opposed his simple faith."

"You've made him, no doubt."

"I have been very glad to advance him, as I am very glad to advance every hard-working and right-thinking young man. Among his other virtues is gratitude."

Nelly Chaffe sang in a thin, little voice that seemed absurd contrasted with her ample person. All joy of life and youth departed from her at the piano. From being a jolly and giggling maiden, too distractingly addicted to laughter, she grew anxious and downcast. Her song, in a minor key, was of the most heart-broken description, and so tiny and so liquid were her vocal gifts that the general effect, heard at a little distance, was rather that of a disordered soda-water syphon.

Mr. Ambrose, however, praised the effort. He had an idea to marry Seabrook to Nelly Chaffe some day. It struck him as a likely engagement for his protégé.

"A sorrowful composition," he said, "but in keeping with the times."

Mrs. Odington was praising Helena's white gown and admiring technical triumphs.

"To learn to wear clothes one must go to Paris," said

Mrs. Ambrose. "In England fashion is a duty: at Paris it is a pleasure."

She quoted thus sometimes from books, which her husband and her friends did not know, thus winning in her circle an undeserved reputation for wit. Wit she had, however: it appeared in her power of selection.

"The result is," continued Helena, as her own opinion, "that in Paris new clothes are alive; in England they are merely new and the breath of life is not in them."

"You would make a sack alive, my dear lady," declared the gallant Mr. Odington.

Then Seabrook performed, and the character of the entertainment gained quality. He controlled a light tenor voice with art. The Cammaerts lyric was much approved, but better still they liked "The Keys of Heaven," to the original English setting. This he gave by request of Mr. Ambrose, who declared it to be his favourite musical number. Mrs. Ambrose played his accompaniments. At ten o'clock the party broke up, and at half-past ten Mr. Ambrose retired.

"Early hours have always been my golden rule," he said; "but I must not impose them upon you."

Geoffrey, however, declared that early hours were his rule also, though once in the seclusion of his chamber, his acts belied his words. Very deliberately he went to bed and blew out his candle. Then he produced an electric reading-light and a book from his suit-case, placed the light in position and read. A clock chimed midnight and still he read on. The book was Flaubert's first *Temptation of St. Anthony*. At five minutes to two he shut the work, extinguished the light and got out of bed. As the clock chimed the hour, he opened his door stealthily and went into the passage. He crept along it and presently heard ponderous and steady snoring proceeding from a distant chamber.

All was intensely dark. Then he heard a little sound and a moment later a pair of arms were round his neck.

For twenty seconds a man and a woman were locked and trembling in calentures of joy. They rained silent kisses upon one another. Then they fell apart. No whisper passed between them; the embrace of ghosts had not been more soundless. Seabrook went back to his room, burning with delight. He returned to bed, heaved a contented sigh and swiftly slept. The woman did the same.

CHAPTER X

IN THE GARDENS

PETER MISTLEY never repeated himself, and though the studio of "Colneside" was hung with the drawings of his happiest achievements and designs for existing summer-houses, pergolas, terraces, and bridges spanning streams, or ornamental waters, to these he seldom referred a second time for inspiration. Not two stairways did he set up alike, or two pillars. Thus he escaped any persistent and inviolate pattern, and none could say of his gardens, what can be said of the creation of many famous gardeners in the past, that such and such a garth was one of his.

Aveline came to see him at the studio soon after his return from Devon, and he spoke about his work. At first her excitement was immense; then before his enthusiasm hers fainted a little.

"I love problems," he said, "as where river levels are prone to rise and threaten a system of ponds, or how to preserve things worthy of preservation, even though they threaten the inspiration that has come to you; and so on."

He showed her designs of a work he held a triumph, where a small red-tiled house crowned three tiers of rock and walled garden and found the apex of the pile with its own roof-tree. Round about were green meadows and woodlands.

"It looks like a butterfly on a flower: you expect to see it fly away," declared Aveline.

Under the window, on the drawing-table, he was working at a great plan and shading in the flower-beds of a rose garden round about a fountain.

"This is the new Devonshire thing," he said. "Let me explain it to you."

He did so; and then she looked through volumes of sketches and photographs of Dutch gardens, Italian gardens, Japanese gardens and old English gardens copied from ancient prints. There were gates and alleys, leaden and marble statues, cisterns and ancient seats, sundials and fountain figures. Book after book he opened: the block records, the drawing registers and a library of colour prints.

To him these were, until recently, the most interesting things in the world — the data and shorthand of his life's work; but she grew bored after an hour of it and began to feel — what most wives, sooner or later, feel: the frantic desire to get away from their husbands' business, even though it may be compact of beauty. Not art itself is proof against the monotony of iteration. He saw the cloud flit over her eyes and the unconscious hand steal up to hide a yawn.

"What a self-centred brute I am," he said. "I'm wearying you to death."

"It's unkind of you even to think so," she declared. "I love your work. I only yawned because you're very hot and stuffy in here."

"Come out, then."

"You've added beauty to every county in England, I believe. I should dearly like to make a pilgrimage to your gardens and worship in them."

"Would you? How proud I should be to show you some."

"The one in France would please me, if it's anything like the drawings."

"It ought to be better, and full of fine, natural accidents by this time."

"I expect Nature often touches things up after you're gone."

He laughed.

"If only Nature did, I shouldn't mind; but I generally know when I leave people, even while they're smiling and thanking me ever so much, and saying it's all perfect, that they're going to stab me in the back as soon as I've departed."

"I don't believe people ever dream of any such thing. And don't think I've nearly done looking at your pictures."

"You ought to pay me in my own coin and make me come and look at some of yours."

"I'm thinking of doing so," she said. "You may not escape long."

"It would be a greater pleasure to me to come and see some of your work than anything else in the world," he answered very earnestly.

Before this assertion she was dumb for awhile; but she thanked him with a look that made him giddy. They walked out, past a row of packing sheds, and beside rows of frames from which the glass had been removed for the summer months. A thousand species of alpine plants sparkled prosperously here in twenty thousand pots.

"How they must long to escape and get back to their mountains," said Aveline.

"They're happy enough."

"How on earth do you know that? I understand them a great deal better than you do. Because I'm built irregularly: you're built four-square. When I was a child, I always wanted something not immediately attainable; and when I grew up, I always wanted something not attainable at all."

"I believe everybody, at some time or other, reaches out for better bread than is made of wheat. The dullest of us have one flight — get wings once — and rise above the earth for a moment or two. Most of us come down again pretty quickly — only the poets and artists can stop in the air."

"You mean everybody has one adventure?"

"I mean everybody wants one adventure. Many don't see the chance when it comes and only recognise it after it has gone. Many — most — find the adventure in marriage. In fact, that's about the only adventure open to the poor."

"To the poor-spirited, you mean. Poverty needn't stop adventure. Look at Billy Ambrose and Emma. Of course, marriage might be the most exciting adventure in the world."

"The ideal marriage oughtn't to be exciting, or dull either; but just satisfying and beautiful."

"Can you imagine such a marriage?"

"Yes," he said, "and so can you. We've both got enough imagination for that."

"As for me," declared Aveline. "I'd sooner marry a devil than a bore. Because you'd be living all the time with the one; but you die all the time with the other. It's better to be happy than unhappy; but it's far, far better to be unhappy than dull."

"We make our own dullness," he said; but she would not have that.

"No we don't — unless we're donkeys. One's only human; one can only fight up to a certain point; then something gives way and the heart breaks, or ——"

"You fly or perish."

She did not answer, but changed colour and stared in front of her. There were tears in her eyes.

"Why talk of devils or dullards?" he asked. "There are others."

"I know that very well. I hate alpins and irises anyway. Show me something else."

He would have given much to speak then and there; but he was a man of methodical mind and seldom acted on the spur of the moment. He had ideas about the future and a sense of what was seemly and distinguished. Therefore he did not throw over his predetermined plan. He tem-

porised, however, and indicated to Aveline that a plan existed.

"Some day I shall ——" he said, and that was all.

"Some day you will be dead; and so shall I; and what's that absurd looking creature doing over there?"

She recovered quickly and he rejoiced, because he rather believed that his four words had been understood. He debated for many hours upon this point after he had left her, and came to the conclusion that he was mistaken, and that she had gleaned nothing from his broken speech. He went farther, indeed, and hated himself for speaking those words. They really argued insolence on his part; for what in the name of heaven did it matter to her what he might, or might not do some day?"

At the time, as Aveline pointed to a labourer, he had replied.

"That's Richard Bare. He's only ridiculous till you understand he's got a screw loose. Then he's impressive. Still, he's funny, too, and you can be amused at him and be sorry for him both. Come and see him."

Richard was a bow-legged man, with buff-coloured gaiters. He wore also corduroy breeches and a blue linen shirt. His coat and waistcoat hung on the limb of an apple tree close at hand. Upon his head was a boy's cricket cap of red and orange segments — a cap too small for him. His head was large, with moony eyes, a flabby mouth and a little button nose. He stood in a broad patch of seedling larkspurs and stripped the pods. Some were ripe and others green. Not far off lay seed trays spread over a path in the sun. Here were fruits of sweet pea, flax and viola, and from the viola trays came a little "crick," "crick," as the triangular capsules burst and discharged their treasure.

"Richard," said Mistley, "come here."

The nondescript approached.

"D'you know what's happening?" asked Mistley.

"Thank God I don't — and don't want to," answered

Mr. Bare. "The newspapers only make my indigestion worse, so I've given 'em up. If I could go into my bed and sleep like a toad for the next two year, I'd pray to let it be done."

"I'm not talking about the war; I'm talking about these violas. You've got your trays all side by side and the violas are popping, and half their seed is jumping into the other trays, and then, when we sell our seeds to the buyers, they'll get into trouble, and so shall we."

"True — all true," admitted Richard, separating the trays. "Be damned if one doesn't learn something every day; and if I had my health, I should be a clever man before I die."

"I thought you were all right again."

"So did I; and I ate a steak and kidney pudding with the faith that moves mountains. And then I found doctor was a liar. I was very near onsensed ¹ by my pangs that night."

He turned to Aveline.

"I'm a great sufferer in the feeding parts and also a great eater. The result of that is, I've never had enough till I've had too much."

"What bad luck," said Aveline.

"A square meal always punishes me," he continued; "but I won't be beat by my stomach. We English never know when we're beat, thank God, so I shall conquer, or go down to my grave a beaten man."

"A house divided against itself falleth, Richard."

"But the man that lets his belly frighten his brain is not worthy of the name. Here am I, a thinking creature with an immortal soul, and am I going to let the lower organs dictate to me and say, 'You shall eat this and you shan't eat that'? It's no better than slavery, as I told doctor. I'll show who's master in my own house!"

"He was a great dancer once," explained Peter to Ave-

¹ *Onsensed*, rendered unconscious.

line. "Nobody could dance like Richard. There's a famous Essex dance called the 'Purleigh Hornpipe.' It's danced to a tambourine and a melodion, and Richard was renowned for it."

"Sometimes I think I'll dance again," said Mr. Bare: "though 'tis a punishing performance after the first hour or so. I've danced three hours by the clock in my time, and only stopped at the half-hours for beer. Yes, I've had a whole taproom spellbound before to-day; but the joints ain't what they were and, for that matter, the company isn't what it was. You don't hear the tambourine like you used to hear it, though a cheerful instrument and calling for some skill. The young men are too proud to learn it, I believe, so I dare say the art will be forgot and the world the poorer. For that matter the 'Purleigh Hornpipe' may be forgot, too, for, God's my judge, nobody will ever have no heart to dance it again if we lose the war."

They left him then, and Mistley said that he must go back to his work. But he did not go. Aveline declared interest in horticulture and they drifted over to a small party of men digging. Mr. Bultitude superintended the operation and Gregory Mushet stood among the workers. The soil was in pleasant tilth and the tulips and other bulbs came out of it clean and bright.

Mr. Bultitude showed pleasure, and drew Mistley's attention.

"Look at these things," he said, "never have I lifted finer. They're hazelling wonderful this year."

"What's 'hazelling,' Mr. Mushet?" asked Aveline, and Gregory explained.

"It means Nature's last polish and perfection put to the ripened root."

"The amber, or russet, or silky overcoat of the bulb," said Mistley.

Aveline picked up some plump scillas and caressed them for delight of their pleasant surface. Then Peter Mistley

went his way, and there came Margery through the gardens with some news for her uncle.

Andrew Hempson had gone into the army and received a commission.

Gregory expressed his satisfaction.

"It's right and proper and I'm glad to hear it," he said; "but it won't end there: his example will be followed by a good few at 'Colneside,' who are holding back. But now he's gone, they'll all be going. And what price the gardens then?"

"You'll have to get women," said Aveline; but Gregory shook his head.

"God forbid we should have a flock of broody hens scratching here," he said. "The war has been brought home to every mind fierce enough, without a bitter thing like that happening."

"That's very old-fashioned, Mr. Mushet," declared Aveline.

"So's gardening," answered Gregory. "'Twas Adam you'll find was the first gardener. He dressed the garden, didn't he, not her?"

Then he went on with his tulip digging, and the women departed together.

Margery was tearful now and Aveline sympathetic.

"It's splendid, if you ask me. If you were a French or Italian girl you'd dress a shrine for him with flowers and pray for him every day. Perhaps he'll speak before he goes, Margery."

"No, he won't. He'll never speak."

"He's a taciturn man, but he feels a great deal. His mother likes you ever so much."

"It'll never be, Aveline. And now, perhaps, he'll go to the front and fall."

"We must hope for good fortune and fame. Talking of French and Italian girls, there's a story I was told of an old rose-grower at Lyons who was celebrated for his

new roses, and there came a year when a maiden rose, from which he hoped wonders, put out its first buds. On the day they should have opened, the old rose-grower went to see them and found that every one of them had been cut off in the night, or at early dawn. The next year exactly the same thing happened and, just before the moment of perfection, the rosebuds vanished. But the third year a watch was set over the rose, and a girl was caught about to take the buds. She worked in the violet beds, and had a lover at sea; and this particular rose went yearly to a little shrine that she kept decorated for her sailor. She'd built up a sort of dream about the rose and her lover, and fancied that he would be safe as long as the Virgin of the shrine had these particular roses. The old rose-grower forgave her, explained what she had done, and gave her a bunch of other roses for her shrine. But she went away doubtful and troubled; and when she heard soon afterwards that her man was drowned, she raved against the old rose-grower and called him a murderer and other hard names."

"I can easily understand mixing up a flower, or a star, or a tree, or anything, with the welfare of some particular person," said Margery.

"So can I. Or a scent, or a colour, or a sound. And some such things, though they may be of no account in themselves, we love for association's sake; and other things, though they may be beautiful every way, we never stop hating, for the same reason. I hate the smell of ver-bena and the sound of Gregorian music, or the sight of alpine plants, more than any other scent, or sound, or sight in the world — not their fault, but my misfortune."

"I know," admitted Margery. "If anybody was to ask me my favourite flower in the world, I shouldn't tell them; but if you were to ask me, I should tell you it was that poor, little, ugly poppy that Andrew brought back after his fearful adventures and clung to despite all dan-

gers. If it had been a lovely thing and a great success, I dare say I'd never have thought of it again; but just because it failed, and he'd hoped so much from it and fought so bravely to keep it, now it's dear to me."

CHAPTER XI

OF THE WEDDED AND MARRIED

WHEN Margery Mayhew learned that her friend meant again to visit Brightlingsea, she wrote in secret to her relations there. Thus, on arriving, Aveline found Teddy Mushet waiting at the station to greet her. He brought a message from his mother and an invitation to midday dinner.

"However did you know I was coming?" she asked.

"Madge wrote me a postcard."

"How like her!"

"Great at doing kind things," said Teddy; and Aveline accepted Mrs. Mushet's invitation and promised to arrive soon after noon. Teddy was in khaki. He had joined the engineers.

"For pontooning and such-like, fishermen come in handy," he explained.

The artist, who had come to paint, spent her morning to poor purpose, for any attempt to sketch was immediately suppressed. Brightlingsea was under military control to the foreshore, and she might not so much as make a study of the mud banks, the Martello tower, or the distant horizon of Mersea.

Half annoyed and half amused, she abandoned her efforts and went to see Mrs. Mushet. Samuel was also at home, for the *Peewit* had been dry-docked for overhauling and repairs.

"We have the opening of the fishery next week," he said. "It is a great occasion, and I like to have the *Peewit* smart for it. Everything is of the best in our fisheries —

the best ware and the best machinery for catching them and putting them on the market."

"And the best men in Essex," said Aveline.

"A very good sort of man, I believe," admitted Mr. Mushet. "And the best oysters in the Thames estuary — the best in the world, for that matter; for here we've the London clay under us and the most perfect conditions between South Foreland and Orford Ness. So, of course, the Pyefleet oysters are better than any known to man."

They spoke of the war, and Mrs. Mushet told how she had trembled and nearly swooned to see her Teddy dressed as a soldier.

"To think," she said, "that one man can doom countless better men than himself to don that filthy colour, and stop the progress of the world, and turn the rising generation into a lot of bloodthirsty soldiers. For it creeps into 'em like a devil when they get the khaki on. Their brains are turned away from the things that were good to them before. The most peace-loving get drawn in, and begin to think like soldiers and take interest in all the slaughter and the inventions for killing. I've marked it again and again in young men who've tasted it, and seen death, and been splashed with the blood of their friends. They go out one thing and they come back another."

"It's a peculiar sort of a war," said Samuel Mushet, "because we're not fighting for a difference of opinion, but a difference of principle. What we want to set up can only be set up in the ruin of Prussia's good; and what Germany wants to set up can only be set up in the ruin of our good. Because Prussia's good is our evil. And whether the rest of Germany will ever see that Prussia's wrong and we are right is a question. But you can't get any sort of progress without security, and because Prussia threatens the security of the world, it's got to go down."

"And meantime I'm not allowed to paint pictures in Brightlingsea," summed up Aveline. "So I'm going for a walk instead, to look at your beautiful church."

She left them with many thanks for their hospitality, dropped her luggage at the station and then wandered off through the lanes to see the church; but she never reached it, for familiar objects confronted her half a mile from the village. Upon a bank in full sunshine a man lay asleep, and on guard over him sat a woman smoking a pipe.

Emma remembered Aveline very well.

"Goodstruth! if it isn't!" she said. "I always told William we should meet you again some time; and here you are, sure enough. Sit down along with us — there's a pretty!"

Aveline, to whom everything unconventional was food and drink, took a seat beside Emma, while Miss Darcy aroused her friend.

"Wake up, William, here's a visitor," she said — "that young 'Grey Eyes.'"

Then she turned to Aveline.

"We always put our own names to people when we talk of 'em. And Billy called you 'Grey Eyes.'"

"Is he better?" asked Aveline. "I heard about him from your brother on the *Peewit*."

"He's well," declared Emma, "or nilly well. He down't get rid of his cough exactly, but he's eating more and drinking less, ain't you, my bird?"

Emma's eyes brightened and she regarded him with devotion.

"Such a clever creature! Could have been Lord Mayor of Lunnon if he'd liked; but God made him workshy, so all's said."

"How's the pictures going on?" asked Mr. Ambrose.

"Nothing much doing," confessed Aveline. "It isn't a time for pictures. But if Emma would only let me paint her, I could do something really interesting."

"Paint William," said Emma.

"No, I want you and your turkey feather."

"You mightn't think it, but she was a rare pretty woman once," declared Billy, yawning.

"She's lovely now," said Aveline. "I can see her sitting with a great mass of torch lilies towering up behind her in your brother's garden. It would be a huge success."

"She's too good for Colchester," declared Billy irrelevantly; "that woman has got the heart of a queen, and where the hell I should be without her, I don't know."

"Yes, you do, my sweetness: you'd be in your grave," said Emma; "and the day you go there, I shall be ready to drop in after you."

"That's the feeling a man ought to put into his woman," declared Billy. "Did you ever feel so fine about a man, 'Grey Eyes'?"

"No," said Aveline, "I never did."

"Ah; then you'll marry again," he said. "I hope you may get the chance to rise to it; but of course it isn't in every man to lift a woman to such a height as that. You want first a man of rare parts — such as I am; and you want second a woman big enough to value him and see his greatness — such as Emma is."

"Why don't you marry Emma?" asked Aveline.

"Tom Darcy asked me that question a bit ago," answered William, "and what I answered him, I won't answer you, because I know how to speak to a lady as well as any one. But I'd have given you credit for more sense than to ask a damn silly question like that. You only asked for the sake of something to say. But when you come to Emma and me, you come to people who move as far above all the little rubbishy arrangements of the community as the moon moves above Piccadilly Circus in London. We couldn't be more married than we are. And what do you know about marriage, anyway — a kid like you, that must have been wife and widow inside a few years? Mating begins when you join the man; but marriage — that starts afterwards. It's not till you look

back and the guilt's off the gingerbread that you begin to know what marriage means. It's like walking into a man-trap with your eyes open."

"I suppose it often is," admitted Aveline; "but you never know till you try; and then it's too late."

"I've seen a lot of marriage, and come to the conclusion it's a human contrivance that's very nearly played out," said William. "At best it's a safeguard and a makeshift dodge to keep human nature on a path that only a couple here and there are fitted to walk in comfort and decency — like me and Emma, for example. Young mated folks are generally happy enough, before marriage sets in; and old married couples are resigned, though it generally breaks one or t'other, if not both, to weather life under the same roof; but the wrench comes, either when the natural state of mating begins to turn into the unnatural state of marriage, or when a man's in the 'roaring forties,' as I call them, and his spirit says, 'Now or never.' If they get as far as that in peace and comfort, it's the man who makes the trouble, because, by that time, the woman's thrown up the sponge and her instinct is to let well alone. So you generally get the static spirit of the female up against the dynamic instinct of the male — an irresistible force striking an immovable object according to the paradox."

"Women aren't always static," said Aveline.

"They're not, and that's the first division of the unhappy marriages. They break away earlier, if they've got the pluck and sense to do it, when they feel the bonds getting too tight."

The listener nodded.

"You know something about it," she said.

"He knows everything about it," declared Emma. "The looker-on with brains like William knows all there is to anything."

"A married man who falls in love after he's forty-five is as desperate as a murderer," went on Billy. "He may

have a pattern wife and a happy home and be quite content with both; but if the something else he's found outside can only be got by shattering that home and that wife, he'll shatter 'em — if he's that sort of man. Many, of course, would balance the new woman against the old, and argue it, and decide the game wasn't worth the candle. But that's a factor none can figure out — not even the man himself, till the storm bursts and he's in it, with love calling and standing, like the last rose of summer, between him and middle age. His time's getting short, and his eyes growing dim and his hair grey. And a man in that fix will be very like to weigh all he's done and built and achieved as dust against that sunset promise of a bit more love before the light of passion's out for ever."

"It's all according as he's been trained and broke in in his youth, and if he's religious, I reckon," said Emma.

"It's according to his blood, not his schooling. Many a man who would willingly die for his country won't kill his love — no, not for his own home. Many conquer temptation, if they're built to conquer 'em; many don't, and wouldn't if they could. It's not a question of right or wrong, but of life or death with such, and it's going to take a bigger thing than wife or children to keep those men from what they want with every fibre of their heart and soul. And most males are built that way, mind you. It's poverty crushes it out of most of them, not morals. But now the instinct is having a lot more to say than when I was a young man, and the Victorian age is past; and once let women begin to feel the same, thanks to their better education, then you'll have more happy matings and fewer unhappy marriages. That's what I see coming."

"The children?" asked Aveline. "No doubt a man can sometimes make the best of both worlds, if he's rich enough, and recuperate in the cool cloisters of home afterwards, without denying himself the nectar and ambrosia waiting to welcome him outside it; but what about his children?"

"Merely a matter of proper law-making," said Billy. "We're frightened away from the subject by that sheet and turnip we call the Church, and that cynical creature we call the State, who holds up the sheet and turnip. But the moment we tackle the problem in a rational spirit, you'll see how much real value there is in the objections. They'll come in your time, and women will be quite as ready to welcome them as men. Freedom's the cry, and if we are not to be free in the vital business of our own lives and our own mates, and in the sacred business of human love, then where does freedom come in?"

Aveline agreed to this. Her face flushed with excitement.

"People are getting braver," she said.

"Corpses handcuffed together — that's what fully half of the married are," declared Billy. "Everything that was worth anything in the creatures has been killed, and they just go on revolving round each other like two dead stars — heart dead, soul dead, even pluck to pray for release dead. And now I've told you a bit about it, don't you ask me and Emma why we ain't married. And don't think being wedded and being married are the same thing, because they are not once in a blue moon."

"Do you understand him, Emma?" asked Aveline.

"Good Lord, no!" she answered. "He talks over my head most times, drunk or sober; but I only know that when we're dead, my dust will want to blow to his, and find no rest in air or water till it have."

"We all know that sort of home, where everything goes on a pretence; and we know what happens sometimes of a night when the pair are in bed and the light out. The only way is the brave way — to cut a loss and get clean and keep your vitality," summed up Billy.

Aveline was in the situation of one who hears his own sentiments echoed forcibly by another and mentally rejoices to find that another shares them. By sharing it, the mouthpiece is exalted to a pinnacle of wisdom, and the

listener does not stay to consider the value of the new voice, or whether it be worthy or worthless in itself. He applauds because the other repeats his own conviction and thereby doubles its importance.

"It must be a glorious thing," she said, "to find that other one."

"Oh! Then you didn't?" asked Emma.

"No, I didn't."

"Better luck next time then. There's a lot has seen you must have fallen in love with you, I'm sure."

"I'm not in love with marriage after hearing your Billy," said Aveline. "There's a great deal of silly sentiment about it."

"There's people silly sentimental about everything," answered Emma. "You can't shake sense into some folk. When my father ran away from mother and went foreign and never came home again, she cry her eyen out for months and said — what d'you think? 'The empty chair's so sad!' And I kept on saying, 'The empty pocket's sadder.' But I durser¹ speak harsh things of my father afore her, for she'd have flown at me if I had."

"I never quite met her like," declared William. "You couldn't move her more than a rock, and she'd hear no word against her husband, and laugh at naked facts. For my part, I always think it weak-minded to treat God A'mighty in that spaniel fashion, and lick the boot that kicks you; but there's lots will do it and properly rejoice to feel somebody else is dusting the floor with them. That's the pride of the humble: to feel the foot of the strong on their necks, and to suffer and suffer, and lick their lips at their own torture, and give the strong their blood to drink if they like. The world's full of them sheep people. Come on, Emma. It's time we trailed home. I want some tea."

"Come along wi' us and have a bite at my brother's," suggested Emma; but Aveline declined.

"I must catch my train," she said. "I meant to go

and see the church; but I've heard a sermon instead, from your William."

"He'd larn anybody but himself," declared Emma. "If he was half so clever as his cleverness, I should have a silk gown home in a box."

Peter Mistley filled Aveline's thoughts on her return journey and she wondered how far he would have agreed with William. Upon the whole she believed that Mistley would not have echoed the tramp's sentiments; yet she could not feel sure of that.

"He knows nothing about it," reflected Aveline; "whereas William and I have so much more experience of life than Peter."

CHAPTER XII

HELENA AND AVELINE

MR. AMBROSE was talking to his wife.

"We open the Fisheries, with our usual ancient ceremonial, shortly," he said; "and, as Mayor for the year, I am the central figure. It is a quaint and venerable custom."

"I wish I could come. It's sure to be charming, and you'll do it so well and make it all so distinguished," declared Helena.

"One likes to lend one's weight to these observances of old time. Anything dignified always attracts me."

"You're so dignified yourself," she said.

"I wish you could come; but the rite belongs to a day before the sex took any part in public affairs. However, I have it in my mind to ask a guest, perhaps two. It has occurred to me sometimes that it might be well if some of us at 'Colneside' better understood the diversity and — and importance of my various activities."

"Surely everybody knows?"

"They know; but don't realise. To be a mayor, if you've not been a mayor yourself, conveys only a vague idea to the mind. Peter Mistley, for example, knows I am Mayor of Colchester. But he has never seen me in the mayoral chair, or at full tide of business, with my officers about me."

"You want to impress him?"

"I think perhaps if he had a glimpse of me outside 'Colneside'——"

"Isn't he civil? Doesn't he show the same tact and proper feeling as Mr. Seabrook shows?"

"When you say 'Seabrook,' you just mark the difference."

"So you're going to reward Mr. Mistley for being a little too independent? No, that's not my meaning either," Helena corrected herself, for she seldom let her wit outrun her wisdom with Parkyn. "It's a good idea, my love. He'll see that 'Colneside' and the making of plans isn't everything."

"I'm glad you think so. But you must not entirely subtract the wish on my part to give him pleasure."

"Shall you ask Mr. Seabrook too? Do. It will be a little reward for all his kindness."

"Not a reward, Helena. The reward — to put it so — consists in the fact that Seabrook knows he is *persona grata* here."

"Then it's just pure kindness on your part, dear one. When he was here last, Mr. Seabrook interested me immensely. He believes that Mr. Mistley is attracted by that pretty girl who has come to Colchester — the painter, who did that drawing of the pond."

Mr. Ambrose lifted his eyes to Aveline's picture, which had been purchased by Helena.

"I fear the young woman will not excel in the pictorial art. If she is allowing herself to think of Mr. Mistley, that would argue a certain callousness of disposition, so soon after the death of her husband."

"She's not that sort at all. She's a most womanly woman. There's nothing in it on her side, for certain. As to her art, it is quite good, really, Parkyn. You're rather old-fashioned, you know, about pictures."

"I expect I am," he admitted. "But I suppose all agree that art is the nearest approach to Nature we can attain by our humble efforts."

"Oh, no, they don't, my darling," answered Helena. "But I'd never convince you. You're a dear, old mid-Victorian, and I wouldn't have you different for the world!"

He smiled indulgently.

"I must see the lady some day for myself."

"I'm not sure if Mr. Mistley is good enough for her."

"Very few men are good enough for a good woman," declared Mr. Ambrose ponderously. "However, I will invite both the draughtsmen to the Fishery opening."

He did so, and Mistley and Seabrook each received a letter from the master of "Colneside."

Seabrook accepted by return with becoming gratitude; the elder waited for a post, and showed his letter to Aveline. He had asked her and Margery Mayhew to drink tea at his rooms, and Aveline appreciated the evidence of intimacy when Mistley handed to her the letter of invitation. They were growing very friendly now, and knew well enough they desired one another. In the man's case his emotion had run on to the stage of exaggeration, and he already created amazing pictures of Aveline's mind and soul. He magnified with the presbyopia of love; while she had not reached that height, but was on the way thereto.

"You'll go," she said; "and then you'll see that what I told you about the saltings was true. And I've had a letter, too — from Mrs. Ambrose. I'm tremendously excited, for she's going to get me a pupil."

"You've been telling Mrs. Hempson you'll have to leave her," said Margery; "but it's no good thinking you're going to, for she won't let you go."

"I love her," declared Aveline, "and I should hate to leave her: she's been very kind to me; but I shan't be able to run to two rooms much longer."

Mistley fell silent while she joked about the need for leaving Mrs. Hempson. He was moved to hear this fact; but her reduced means seemed to bring her nearer. Peter had already suspected the situation.

"Don't charge this possible pupil too little," he said. "They'll think nothing of you if you only ask a very small fee. Pitch it pretty high to start with anyhow; then if

they grumble, or Mrs. Ambrose thinks you ought to ask less, you can come down gracefully."

She promised to obey, and after Aveline and Margery left him and returned homeward on foot to Mile End, the latter spoke of Mistley with admiration. She was genuine in her praise, yet allowed it to be a little tintured with the knowledge that Mistley and Aveline evidently came closer and closer together. Margery, quickened by personal experience of the tender emotions, perceived what the man and woman were each to the other, and she had tried more than once to win a confession on the subject from Aveline and failed.

Everybody, however, seemed in league to talk to Aveline of Mistley, and if Margery and Mrs. Hempson and another here and there did so of set purpose, others only fell accidentally on Mistley's name. Of such — so at least the visitor at first supposed — was Mrs. Ambrose; but in truth, as appeared, Helena did not speak in ignorance when Aveline accepted an invitation and came to tea at the Manor House of Mersea.

The day was bright, and she took the public motor and enjoyed the drive and the view. Then came Miss Chaffe, all smiles and laughter and goodwill. She did not know anything about drawing, it seemed; but dear Helena wanted her to learn; and no doubt Mrs. Brown would soon teach her. She spoke as though the art of drawing must be on a par with the craft of knitting socks, and Aveline's heart failed; but Helena foretold that Nelly Chaffe would soon develop talent, "because music and painting always go together," and she decided the fees without asking Aveline, and fixed them at twice the rate the teacher intended to suggest.

"That's too much for a beginner," declared the artist.

"Not at all. The beginner is always most difficult to teach; and though Nelly won't be difficult, still a beginner is a beginner. I'm sure she's got a sense of colour.

That's the great thing. You're such a colourist yourself that you'll soon make her feel it."

It was quite clear that Aveline had been taken under Helena's wing. She was to be patronised and brought into notice. She was "sweet," and a "genius," and possessed all the virtues. Aveline found the atmosphere of admiration pleasant enough. She liked Helena with a substratum of doubt. Her intuition read Mrs. Ambrose up to a point; indeed she found something of herself reflected in the other woman. But she knew enough to know that she did not know all about Mrs. Ambrose, and, after two or three meetings, began to believe there might be more in her patroness than appeared. But was Helena likely to do anything that would meet with her disapproval? That question Aveline asked herself and answered definitely — out of her knowledge of herself rather than her knowledge of the other. Yet her knowledge of herself was faulty and built on very shadowy foundations. Looking back she felt no remorse, and life, as it unfolded, seemed more and more to condone her own past actions; but yet the underlying, inherited respect of tradition belonged to her. She was like many people, who, while they pardon their own conduct, often (to their own surprise) lament similar courses of action in others.

Finally Aveline explained this anomaly to her own satisfaction. It was undoubtedly the opinion of Peter Mistley that awoke in her the doubt, and reserved judgment before Helena's friendship. For Peter did not like Mrs. Ambrose, and Aveline suspected that his distrust had served to cloud her own view. Yet even so she blamed herself, for what could be advanced against the lady? The element of patronage did not disturb Aveline. Yet she could comprehend Mistley's pride and his disdain of Seabrook, who also appeared to enjoy Helena's goodwill and support. She supposed that what might be reasonable in a woman ought to be impossible for a man. She did not mind being patronised herself, but would have resented the

spectacle of anybody patronising Mistley. So she held judgment in abeyance, and was meantime very glad to accept friendship of so practical a nature as Mrs. Ambrose offered. In any case the matter was unimportant to Aveline now, for with growing love, all other things grew dwarfed. Even her vanishing means troubled her but little: a far more mighty complication threatened, and her immediate future was beset with difficulties. A strenuous and ordered mind had fainted under them; but her inherent volatility promised to bring her through. The storm that throws the oak will leave the willow unharmed.

Mrs. Ambrose talked of men when the subject of pictures had been exhausted.

“What an example they set us of courage and bravery! When people praise me for my humble Red Cross efforts, I scarcely have patience to reply. The manhood of England has been magnificent. The way we have risen to this dreadful test! I wonder if other women are as proud as I am, or if they lack the imagination to see the immensity of it all. I think every British woman ought to feel herself a Britannia. I’m sure I do.”

Aveline was conscious that Mrs. Ambrose tried to look like Britannia and, indeed, succeeded fairly well.

“A time is coming,” continued the lady, “when more and more will fall upon us, as more and more of our men are wanted. For instance artists, such as Mr. Peter Mistley, at ‘Colneside,’ may be called.”

“Artists wouldn’t hesitate for a minute, you may be certain,” said Aveline.

“But what could they do? Can you turn an artist into a soldier?” asked Miss Chaffe.

“You can,” declared Helena; “an artist, just because he is an artist, may rise to anything. Look at the versatile geniuses of the Renaissance. It is the wonderful thing about the creative instinct that you can pour it into any channel, and immediately flowers spring up on the banks of that channel. Turn an artist into a soldier and you

will get a super-soldier; and if artists condescended to go into politics, then you get an order of politicians whose ideas would create a new world, and not leave beauty out of human and national relations. I am sure Mr. Mistley would make a fine soldier, and I dare say Mr. Seabrook might, too."

"He's such a gentle little man," said Aveline.

"Gentle, yes; little, no. At least I should judge him to be rather above the middle height."

"He always seems little to me," said innocent Aveline.

"You'll find that perfectly proportioned men never suggest height, any more than perfectly proportioned towers, or mountains. If a man is too thin, or too stout, he looks too tall or too short as the case may be; so does a mountain. Size is nothing; proportion is everything. But if I had my way I should despatch Mr. Seabrook to France — not to fight, but to sing at the base. They call it 'the base,' don't they? His wonderful voice would uplift all who heard it, and send the fighters back to the trenches ready for deeds of heroism. To send him to the trenches would be to waste a tonic, a fountain of melody far more precious than his individual effort in arms. Now in the case of Mr. Mistley, how would that apply?"

She turned to Aveline, desiring to learn her opinion of Peter and not wishing further criticism of the other draughtsman.

"I don't know," said Aveline. "He said to me, when he was talking about it, that if the need presently arose, he should go."

"It is the simple sense of duty that is so fine and impressive," pattered on Helena. "I love men for that — all men. I believe they've got a higher sense of duty than we have. They're simpler-minded than we are. That's why they dominate us. We have much more power, really, if we could mobilise it — I said that about the suffragettes — but we are so complex and so prone to let the heart master the head, that we never really give our brains a

chance; and the result is — however, that will all be altered after the war. The women have mobilised over the war magnificently, and they will keep so afterwards. I have mobilised; you have mobilised; we all have mobilised.”

“I haven’t,” said Aveline. “And I feel ashamed about it. I’m doing nothing.”

“But Mr. Mistley? He seems to me a splendid fellow, and more than an artist — a fine man.”

“To be an artist is to be a fine man,” said Aveline. “At least to me.”

“Not always. But, of course, the great artists are generally great men too — great soldiers, even. Michaelangelo and Phidias, and so on. Does he ever speak about world subjects, or only gardening art?”

“He finds everything interesting.”

“That’s what I say about men: they’re so large-minded. But you must have defects with qualities. The worst of large-minded men is that often they’re large-minded just where their wives don’t want them to be. You can’t have wisdom and charm and universal knowledge and so on, without the material from which it springs. In sex matters, for instance — you needn’t listen to us, Nelly — there is one thing that a man loves better than his wife, or even his mistress in the long run, and that is variety. The really large-minded man must and will have variety for the health of his soul. We don’t understand that.”

“Yes, we do,” declared Aveline; “because some of us are the same.”

This assertion interested Mrs. Ambrose very much.

“Fancy a chit of a child like you saying so!” she exclaimed. “What the rising generation is coming to! But I hope you’re wrong. I believe very few of us want variety, if we are married to the man we really love.”

“That’s just it,” said Aveline, with memories of Billy and Emma, “very few of us are married to the man we really love.”

“I wonder? It’s rather sad to hear a girl speak so.

But perhaps we, who are perfectly and supremely happy, can hardly judge; and so we make the mistake of supposing that all the others are as happy as we are. Still, there's no doubt so many novels wouldn't be written about unhappy marriages if they did not happen. What does Stevenson say? That marriage is only 'a friendship recognised by the police.' It all comes back to my view. Variety is the salt of the male existence — I don't mean, of course, only where we are concerned. We're merely a part of their lives, and not the most important part."

"We shouldn't think any the better of them if we were," declared Aveline.

"A man always steals the first kiss, and a woman always begs the last — it's all summed up in that; the attitude of the sexes, my dear. Not original, however. I should never have made the observation myself — much too old-fashioned and much too happy."

Mr. Ambrose returned home and entered the drawing-room for a cup of tea. Then the subject was dropped, and the manner of Helena changed. She made much of her husband, and ordered fresh tea to be brought.

"I never expected you, or we should have waited," she said.

"Our meeting was postponed owing to the failure of certain people to answer municipal letters," he explained. "It is quite extraordinary how unbusinesslike business men can be. I judge nobody; but the meeting was postponed."

Mr. Ambrose discussed painting with Aveline, and was both courteous and kind.

"It's not for me to advise a professional," he said; "but I feel, with all humility, that you must consider things as they really appear a little more in your works of art. That would enable us to understand them better. I speak as a plain man, and represent the majority of cultured people, who are not ignorant of what a picture should be; because we all have some knowledge of the greatest examples in the world. I refer, of course, to the Old Masters."

"But, my darling, the Old Masters are so old," argued Mrs. Ambrose. "Art cannot stand still for the Old Masters. It must go on — upward, ever upward."

"If it can surpass Titian and Raphael, I, for one, shall be the first to bend the knee."

"Just because it can't surpass them, it wants to find new channels and be different," explained Aveline. "It wants to say new things in a new language that's never been used by art before."

"If a thing has been supremely well said, only vanity, or ignorance, would seek to say it again," declared Parkyn in his magistral manner.

"We don't want to say it again, Mr. Ambrose. We want to say something new."

"But is what you want to say worth saying?" he asked.

"We hope to show it is."

Later in the evening Mr. Ambrose, with characteristic courtesy, accompanied Aveline to the motor omnibus which would convey her back to Colchester. His wife walked with them, and the visitor took a grateful farewell and departed.

"She's going to give Nelly some lessons in drawing. Isn't she a dear?" asked Helena, as she and her husband turned homeward.

"She has the bloom and the charm of youth, and conceals her sufferings almost too completely," said the master of "Colneside."

"What sufferings?"

"Is she not a newly-made widow?"

"Yes; one doesn't realise that, I admit."

"Again, I had rather hoped from her modesty of manner and nice deference to you and me, that she was one of the older-fashioned type. I had hoped to see her travel back to Colchester inside the omnibus; but you see she went on the top."

"For the sake of the air and the view. That's nothing, my dear."

"I suppose not," said Mr. Ambrose; "I suppose not."

CHAPTER XIII

OPENING THE FISHERY

ENGLAND still remembers many an ancient rite, and preserves her old-time ceremonials with jealous care. Indeed, most towns of respectable antiquity possess their proper observances from the past, and hold good citizens who are zealous to support them. Such men preserve their local traditions, and look to it that ancient practice shall not perish.

The opening of the Colne Oyster Fishery was such a survival. The event is of autumn, and on a day appointed, Mr. Parkyn Ambrose, with the chief officers of Colchester, proceeded to the estuary, there to enact an ordinance from mediæval time.

The Mayor and his Councillors, together with the members of the Fishery Board and such guests as were bidden, set out from Colchester soon after nine o'clock. With them went the Town Sergeant, who carried the mace in a red baize bag; and under his charge also was a tin box containing the robes of the Mayor and the wig and gown of the Town Clerk.

Some fifty Burghers supported the head of the Borough. Peter Mistley and Geoffrey Seabrook knew several among the throng, and travelled with acquaintance. The Mayor had greeted them and other visitors on the railway platform.

The Chairman of the Fishery also joined the company. He was an old man, but entered upon the labours of the day with the enthusiasm of youth.

"What he does not know about oysters is not worth knowing," said the Fisheries Manager, behind the Chair-

man's back. Indeed, it was the truth. The veteran held the history of Colchester and its industries at his fingertips.

"In Rome to-day," he said to the Town Clerk, with whom he travelled, "men still dig up Colne oyster shells from the strata of the Second Century. The Romans knew a good thing when they found it."

But the Town Clerk, who had not before played his part in the coming ceremony, was more interested in the Fishery and its grants and liberties.

"Richard the First confirmed our Charter," explained the Chairman, "and the preamble asserts, that even at his date, our rights belonged to time immemorial, so you'll guess they are not of yesterday. Believe me, Boadicea ate a plate of 'natives' after she had turned the Romans out of Camalodunum, as Colchester was called in her time, and Blackwater ran red with their blood."

By wooded Wyvenhoe, the train proceeded over the levels beside Colne until it ran out presently into the region of the saltings, where mud and water shone brilliantly under a cloudless sun. The estuary swiftly opened; tufts of feathery tamarisk waved on the low shores and the sea lavender lighted the flats with its purple, where they stretched out their fingers into the tidal ways. A blue dome of sky lifted above the distant rim of elms and ripening corn, while under the glittering water, up every creek, in every tongue of the tide and far away to sea, the oysters dwelt in millions.

At Brightlingsea Mr. Ambrose and his supporters came presently to the Hard, where boats already awaited them, and the *Peewit*, in glory of bunting and fresh paint, lay off shore with steam up.

But a cloud was destined to mar the Mayor's embarkation. Solemn as a doge he trod the jetty, when suddenly from the local throng assembled to see him start, there stumbled the form of his brother. It was not one of William's good days, and he had already lost sobriety.

"Here we are again!" he said. "Why — the devil! Where's your war-paint? I thought you were going to wear your cocked hat and the wine label, you old blighter!"

Mr. Ambrose rolled his eyes for help, and the Town Sergeant hastened to his side. Then Emma's turkey feather was seen pushing its way through the spectators. The people surged up and Billy was swallowed. He exploded with curses on the jetty, and coarse laughter faintly reached his brother's ears.

Mr. Ambrose sighed and kept silent for some time. The incident was tactfully ignored by his friends, and soon four boatloads from Colchester and Brightlingsea came alongside the *Peewit*. With the three crowns of Colchester fluttering at her masthead and the steamer of the river police leading the way, she set out, dodged the Engineers, still toiling on their pontoons, rounded the point and made to sea, that she might patrol the boundaries of the Fishery. Black and grim, a fleet of mine-sweepers slipped out to the Channel before her, and the *Peewit* dipped her flag to the Admiral's yacht that went with them. His white ensign nodded acknowledgment, and he and his sombre squadron were soon hull down.

Aboard, the crew wore their best jerseys, and the skipper was resplendent. Even Mr. Mushet, in the engine-room, had donned a clean suit of russet dungarees, and Tom Darcy looked striking with his golden ear-rings and a flame-coloured scarf about his neck. Mr. Saul Rebow, master of the *Peewit*, was summoned to the Mayor presently. He descended from his perch and Darcy took his place at the helm. "Old Tell-yer-fer-why" wore snow-white ducks, a blue jersey with *Peewit* in red letters upon his breast, and a cap of dark cloth with a gold band upon his head. He made much of the Mayor; indeed they patronised each other. Each was alive to the dignity of his possession, and each regarded their meeting as an event not devoid of historical interest.

"I've seen twenty-two Colchester mayors go through the Opening," said Mr. Rebow, "and I may tell you some shine at it and some don't."

"Hush!" murmured Mr. Ambrose; "there are ex-mayors present to-day."

"I know it; I've got my weather-eye lifting," answered the captain. "The mayors come and the mayors go, but me and my crew and my ship go on. I remember you in the past and I'll give you a tip, Mr. Mayor, if you're not above taking it. The human voice have to be lifted a lot above land pitch when you're on sea; and if you want the old words to roll out proper, you'll have to bellow a bit."

"I thank you," said Mr. Ambrose. "But I had always understood that water was a good conductor of sound. In this case, too, we shall be grouped fairly close together, as the ceremony will take place on the barge."

The barge, indeed, was already in sight — a spacious craft at rest in the Pyefleet creek, whither the steamer now turned her way. She was soon at anchor alongside and her passengers assembled themselves on the anchored vessel, while Mr. Ambrose and the protagonists of the rite retired into the *Peewit's* cabin to robe.

The *Native* was the name of the beamy barge, and she had been made ready for the occasion. Forward stood a table covered with red cloth, and from it there ran amidships two long forms for those about to assist at the ceremony. The company arrived and sat in two rows upon the forms. It was now noon, with the sun over the foreyard-arm. The river shone, and the tide, amaking, began slowly to swallow the mud banks round about. Waterfowl flew overhead — crying seagulls, flitting sand-snipe, wailing curlew and a string of barnacle geese, that advanced in line landward before the tide. The hot air quivered over the flats, where, outlined dimly against the flash of many waters, there faded away northerly and easterly the long-shore levels. Here low-lying earth was thronged by the rounded heads of great, innumerable elms. The

mainland revealed mile upon mile of their wooded bosses, dim through the summer haze, and Mersea Island was also fledged with fine timber, towering amid her flat meadows and fallow lands. In endless ranks the trees dwindled upon the blue of distance, and among them rose little towers and steeples, single manor houses or farms, and the clustered roofs of hamlet and thorpe.

Clad in robes of black and gold, with his insignia of office upon a scarlet ribbon, and a cocked hat on his head, Mr. Ambrose now appeared. He was preceded by the Town Sergeant. The Sergeant, a fine figure of a man, also wore black and gold with a three-cornered hat. His noble calves bulged in white stockings. He had a clean-shaved Irish face and a mobile mouth, full of laughter.

“Oyez! Oyez!! Oyez!!!” he bellowed, in a voice big enough to satisfy Mr. Rebow; and thus the ceremonial began.

First came the Mayor, with scroll in hand, and sonorous, but monotonous, inflection.

“‘I pray all of you here present to keep silence while the Town Clerk do read, according to ancient custom, the Proclamation declaring the Fishery open.’”

And then was told, in good set terms, how “the Several Fishery of the River Colne and waters thereof hath from time beyond which memory runneth not to the contrary, belonged and appertained to the Corporation of the Borough of Colchester by whatsoever designation called or known.” The waters were at present shut in accord with ancient usage; but from this day forward they would be opened, “and continue open until such day as shall be seemed proper and appropriate for the closing thereof.”

The Town Clerk farther read the terms of the proclamation made in Colne Water during the year 1256. They told how former monarchs, “progenitors of our very excellent Lord King, who now is,” have granted to the Burgesses of Colchester various privileges including the fishery of the North Bridge as far as Westnesse on either

side; and the presents warn that "no man nor other person may place piles, weirs nor other works of hand nearer to our said water than is necessary for the maintenance of their properties. Nor that any dredgers of oysters may dredge broods at any time, except in the time limited, under pain of forfeiture and grievous amerciaments."

Now came the moment for the toast, and when the Town Sergeant had cried with a great voice: "God save the King, the Mayor and this Corporation!" all were ready.

"Three cheers for His Majesty," said Mr. Ambrose. Then rose the greeting, and half a hundred flashes to the sunlight, for in every man's right hand was a wine-glass of gin, and in his left a little cake of gingerbread. This was the immemorial fare of the occasion — a legacy from old Flanders, when traffic and inter-trading¹ between the Netherlands, Flanders and Essex were closer than to-day. Still, however, its evidences exist beyond the gin and gingerbread, for the warranty of Flemish and Dutch forbears is manifest upon our eastern coastline, where old Dutch and Low country names are numerous.

A telegram was now despatched to the Monarch, and the pinnacle of the river police flashed away with it to Brightlingsea.

A minor ceremony remained, and when Mr. Ambrose had doffed his fur and gilt, the party returning to the *Peewit* crowded her bulwarks while she went slowly ahead and watched the throwing of the first dredges for the year. Into the tide splashed a couple of nets, one dropped by the Mayor, and the other by the Chairman of the Fishery; and presently Tom Darcy and the skipper himself hauled at the ropes and brought the dredges inboard.

The oysters were of a uniform leaden hue touched with warm umber, and many, making growth, had thrust out a new fringe of shell with lustre as yet unstained. A noble "native" was selected for the Mayor, and opened by Mr.

¹ Sir Walter Scott makes mention of this small merchandise conveyed by Dutch and Flemish sailors.

Rebow with his cultack. Enthroned on its bed of pearl the silver-grey oyster sat. Six summers had passed over him and brought him to splendour. Mr. Ambrose, perhaps the only man on the boat who smiled not, took the shell in his hand, covered the shell-hinge with his thumb, that no scrap of London mud might follow the oyster to its tomb, and raised it to his lips. A moment of suction and the shining shell was bare.

“A real ‘Whitstable Royal,’” said the Chairman. “One only regrets he will never appreciate his pleasing fate, or know that this dramatic and honourable end was reserved for him.”

Far off on the flats a solitary building rose, and having inspected other reaches of the Fishery and found the contents of the trawls full of promise, for harvest was abundant, the steamer turned to distant Peewit Island, and many hungry burghers began to reflect on luncheon.

Hither by the heron-haunted mud flats they came.

The packing sheds were transformed into bowers of gay bunting above long tables, where a thousand open oysters lay garnished with lemons, flanked by brown bread and butter, supported by a regiment of bottles. Upon the island were ranged the pares, or pits, that the high tide flooded. Round them grew the ubiquitous sea lavender, with sea asters, breaking their flower-buds, sea purslane and other weeds of the land. Seeding grasses waved, and rush and sedge dipped to the mud banks, where the glass-worts began to flush with autumn crimson. Lording it above the ridges, a Thames barge or two went up on the tide to Hythe, and overhead the herons wheeled and cried, “Frank! Frank!” or sat humped on their fishing grounds amid the pools and backwaters. The tang of the mud was fresh and sweet. It set an edge on appetite, and the August sun had awakened hearty thirst.

Speech-making, cigars and song concluded the luncheon on Peewit Island. The cigars were of the best, the speeches plain and to the point. War had struck at the

roots of their trade, for highly-priced natives cannot be given away, and the company's huge markets in Belgium, Germany, Russia and France were closed.

Mr. Ambrose explained the position.

"Not even our Allies may claim their customary thousands," said he, "for oysters are a valuable foodstuff and must not be exported until war is at an end. We have, however, voted ten thousand of the finest oysters in the Colne at this moment to our Red Cross for the hospitals; and as for the usual three million for this year's market, I feel very sure that in the expert hands of our Manager and staff, time and opportunity will find a way."

The Chairman also made a speech, illustrated with hope and humour. He pinned his faith to the unsurpassable qualities of Colne natives.

"Still they hold pride of place in the oyster world," he assured his company; "and though fashion may change and now the American 'Blue Point' reign, and now that choice fish from County Clare, still our true-born native is the best oyster of them all, and retains that supreme lordship he won of old, when paleolithic man first consumed him in doubt and digested him with joy. For older than humanity is the oyster, gentlemen, and he lived and throve for centuries upon the London clay beds, before he was discovered by conscious intelligence and his fame shouted round the prehistoric lodges."

A song — a veritable oyster classic — followed the speech-making. It was the composition of a famous Colchester citizen, humourist and man of letters — one descended from an Ypres family, whose refugee forefathers had come to England in Elizabethan days.

The Fisheries' Manager sang this humorous ditty with due effect, and the jest won its measure of applause.

"Though men may rudely drag him from his shell
And probe and prod and pepper him as well
And sour his mild existence — yet, what then?
To live for some brief space in mouths of men

Is fame, and this fulfils the Oyster's mission;
To please and satisfy is his ambition;
And though not proud, his gentle heart will flutter
To know he's worthy of his bread and butter!"

The sun was westering and the tide had turned before the *Peewit* set off for home again. Peter Mistley picked a big bunch of sea lavender for Aveline before he left the island, and not a few men decorated their buttonholes with sprigs of it.

At "The King's Head" the Mayor and burgesses drank tea. It is a long, low-built building of two storeys, with a roof of red tiles and a verandah before its face. In the midst a bubble of glass bulges upon the street, and here lies the public bar — a frank and conspicuous place of entertainment, where every man may spy on his neighbour's refreshment.

During the meal a telegram arrived from the King, in response to that despatched from sea during the morning. He was well pleased to learn that his subjects prospered, thanked them for their loyal greeting, and wished all good to the Fishery.

One visitor at least echoed that wish from his heart, for Peter Mistley found himself impressed and inspired by his day with wise and kindly fellow-men.

They had played their parts as their forefathers played them, and in so doing worthily transmitted a tradition that extended far beyond Colne and her ceremonial rites. For such survivals, he thought, seemed to link all England with the rugged, spacious times of the past, with that Merrie England of the Golden Age, when men were building by glorious adventure a coming greatness none could guess, and establishing those steadfast foundations of national character and national courage on which, four-square, there stood the fighting Empire of his day. From the sleepy estuary of Colne, with its stately elms and corn whitening for the sickle, it seemed a remote flight to battle-fields and the red wrath of war; yet Peter knew that thou-

sands nurtured in these scenes were honouring their motherland yonder; and few of the men who had participated in this old custom, but had a son, or brother at the far-flung front. To-day they hid their hearts and kept the shadow out of their eyes; they performed their tasks in the trivial play of the hour as though it were a vital matter, not to be maimed by an omission, or shortened by a word.

“For of such is our kingdom,” thought the artist.

CHAPTER XIV

COMEDY

MISTLEY and his colleague worked together in the studio on the morning after their visit to Colne.

"Look at this," said Geoffrey, "and tell me if you ever saw anything quite so ridiculous. It's the military garden for Sir David Appleyard, in Shropshire. Salients and redoubts. He wants clumps of everything to look like piles of shells! And if we could perform feats of topiary and put shrubs in the shape of cannon in these embrasures, he'd bless us. He says the world is really a gigantic fortress. He sees military design everywhere. It's his argument that God Almighty planned the races of mankind to make war and slaughter each other."

"Miserable old fool," said Peter.

"That's the rum thing: he isn't. Quite intelligent outside soldiering. He believes in God with a fierce belief, and won't hear a word against faith."

"The greatest argument against God is man," grunted Mistley; "and the crushing objection to design, that they're always bleating about, is the world. There's chance and hazard and accident in every aspect of the ramshackle pill."

"You want a pill yourself," said the other. "Anyway, if you'd been called to make it, we should have had — goodness knows what — something between the hanging gardens of Babylon and the Tuileries, I suppose, with all the seas square and all the rivers straight lines from source to mouth."

"And if you had," retorted Peter, "we should have seen something between the Crystal Palace grounds and the

transformation scene in a pantomime — grandiose, blatant, absurd. Your buttercups would be as big as basins and your daisies a foot across. I can see your idea of flowers, with birds to match — tomtits as big as eagles — violets that you could smell a mile off; everything blazing with colour and never a cloud in the staring, blue sky.”

Seabrook laughed at this picture of his world.

“How did she like the bunch of sea lavender?” he asked abruptly.

But the other did not choose to hear. Seabrook’s efforts at a little mild chaff on the subject of Aveline were always ignored by him.

“Those mud flats were very splendid — stately and simple, with their flower masses used as they should be used,” said Mistley.

“Nature ought to feel flattered.”

“The whole thing was fine — the ceremony and the people.”

“You’re not a misanthrope after all.”

“Ambrose has just the mind for a thing like that. He carried it off all right.”

“I thought he was grand,” declared Seabrook. “I believe Mrs. Ambrose coached him a bit. She has the dramatic instinct.”

“A rotten instinct, too. If Ambrose had tried to be dramatic he’d have made an ass of himself. His wife is a mass of imbecile affectation, if that’s what you mean by dramatic. She’s a humbug, through and through. You know by the very voice of her and the way she mouths her words and rolls her eyes that she’s not real. Affectation like that sickens me. It’s a sort of emasculated lying all the time.”

Geoffrey Seabrook took this indictment against the most precious thing in his life with sublime calm. His voice did not quiver. He uttered his cheery little laugh.

“It’s a game, really,” he said. “They play it together — people like that — and if you can’t play the game your-

self, it bores you and seems dull. Theatrical people — actors and actresses, I mean — are mostly like that. After a time they get into an amusing way of always acting together, even when they're off the stage. I believe they go on acting when they're all alone. It's the mimetic temperament."

"It's unreal, and ruins sincerity and creates an utterly false scale of values."

"I dare say it does. But where is the scale of values that isn't false? Children love to pretend, and we are told that the childlike mind is beautiful."

"Posing and insincerity aren't beautiful. That woman's a poser, always looking out of the corner of her eyes to see the effect — always wanting new men at her chariot wheels."

"What woman?"

"Mrs. Ambrose. She's not an artist, really; she's not capable of feeling in any fine sense."

Seabrook made no effort to play knight to the distressed damsel. If possible his caution erred in the extreme of his indifference. But Peter Mistley, of course, suspected nothing.

"No doubt you're right," said Geoffrey. "I don't know much about women."

"Oh, yes, you do," answered the other; "you know a great deal more about them than I do, for that matter. They interest you more, and you know how to please them, which is more than I do."

"Don't say that. Now you're being a humbug yourself. You know how to please one, anyway; and I suppose nobody wants to please more than one — at a time."

And then, incited thereto, perhaps, by his senior's blistering opinion of Helena, Seabrook determined to speak of Aveline. He had often studied her in the studio, and she had been gracious to him, as she was gracious to everybody. Mistley did not answer his last remark, and now he spoke again.

"All women act more than men. To see a little bit of the truth of them, you must be onlooker and hear them talking to other people. It's like watching a game of cards. If you're playing a hand yourself, you can't see so much. When Mrs. Brown strolls in — for a bit of india rubber, or a pencil or something — well, one notices little touches. If you're actually talking to her you forget everything but her eyes and mouth and voice; but if you're not ——"

"What then?" said Peter.

"Then you notice — a sort of — a — sort of illusive-ness — a sort of watchfulness. She's on guard all the time, really."

"All women are."

"Not necessarily — not with friends and people they know are harmless. Another thing: she's not so happy as she pretends to be."

Peter Mistley was profoundly interested, and endeavoured to hide the fact.

"She's hard up and anxious."

"I don't think being hard up would make her particularly anxious. Has she ever told you anything about her married life?"

"I never asked."

"Naturally; but that wouldn't prevent her telling you if she wanted you to know."

Mistley did not answer, and Seabrook began to praise Aveline.

"Don't misunderstand me, Peter. I don't mean she's sly, or anything like that. She has a nature that I should think craved for sympathy and understanding. She's an artist, and thundering clever, of course. I'm merely saying she's got something on her mind."

Mistley thawed a trifle.

"No doubt she can paint. And as to being in need of sympathy and all that sort of thing, I doubt it. She's very independent."

"If she's as hard up as you say, she can't be independent."

Seabrook had now reached the stage when he hoped to win at least a confession of interest from Peter; but what the latter might have said next, he never did say, for they were interrupted.

There came Mr. Ambrose.

"Well, young men, I hope you enjoyed yourselves," he began, and both declared they had done so. Seabrook ventured to dwell on the dignity and distinction of the ceremony as conducted by the Mayor himself; while Mistletoe hinted at how the occasion had struck him as a whole, in words that echoed in his thoughts of the previous day. Mr. Ambrose knew what the younger man would say; but what Mistletoe might think he did not know. He seldom wasted time in business hours, but now he talked for some while, his conversation being chiefly devoted to repeating Mistletoe's terse sentiments in his own more elaborated sentences. He was, however, very gracious to Geoffrey Seabrook, also. Indeed, he had a favour to ask in that quarter.

"I am off to Scotland next week for a few days, and the visit may extend to a fortnight, if not more," he said. "It is not wholly unconnected with business; indeed, at a time like this I should not allow myself to go solely for pleasure. My direction will be left at the office, and I may have occasion to write to you, Mistletoe, about possible work near Glasgow. Mrs. Ambrose does not accompany me, and I am going to ask you, Seabrook, if she should need your kindly aid in any direction not to deny it to her."

"Of course, sir — anything I can do."

"We put upon you; indeed we trade upon your extraordinary generosity. I have told her so," said Mr. Ambrose.

"Far from it — a privilege — there's so very little one can do," declared Seabrook.

"My wife is so eager and willing to sacrifice her time for the good of others that occasionally — I speak in con-

fidence — she forgets that we have not all so much leisure as she herself enjoys. Quite a tyrant — I speak playfully, of course. But her deep feeling on the subject of the war and her resolution to work night and day for it, and make others do the same, is worthy of all praise. In fact,” summed up Mr. Ambrose, “no man knows how good a woman can be unless he be brought into close contact with such a woman. That is my privilege, and I hope in course of time you young men will enjoy similar privileges.”

He continued to discourse benevolently for a while, then bade them good-bye until his return, and went to the office.

“I hope she doesn’t want to dance me about,” murmured Geoffrey. “I rather hoped to get off for a few days myself; but I suppose I can’t go now till Mr. Ambrose comes back.”

“We’re all the same — insincere humbugs, every one of us,” growled Peter Mistley. “You tell him to his face you’ll be proud to do anything for her, and then, behind his back, swear at the necessity.”

Which was just the impression that Mr. Seabrook desired to convey.

CHAPTER XV

ON THE STOUR

SENSITIVENESS belongs to temperament, and culture leaves it where nature did. Many highly educated men and women utterly lack sensitiveness, while a day labourer may possess it. But there is no closer bond, and no parity of tastes and enthusiasms can so well draw people together; since taste is acquired and sensitiveness innate. Thus the very fastidious niceness and acuteness of feeling — that thin-skinned susceptibility, which may keep lovers apart during the earlier stages of a romance — at the end crushes them together in a sympathy that no lesser force can create. Such a man cries to the darkness until he finds the echo of his heart returning to him from the woman; and then they melt together.

Without being vain, Peter regarded himself as one who pursued existence with dignity and self-respect, and kept the light burning to the best of his powers. Now the case was altered, for while love soon reaches to the altitude of sublimation and exaggeration where the loved object is concerned, it goes, if anything, to the opposite extreme in the lover's heart, throws a light of remorseless charity into his own soul, infallibly shows him things about himself that he never saw before, and tinges his faintest faults with a colour that reveals what was before invisible. As the transparent atom is tintured, that we may observe it under the microscopic lens, so love tints the least unsuspected traits in a sensitive spirit, and accentuates errors of character already known. Above all, it quickens the instinct for defence, and teaches the lover to conceal his imperfections from the loved one — especially those which

her opinions and taste lead him to suspect would be least pleasing.

A sense of vagueness and reality slipping away accompanied Mistley's new illumination. By nature he was neither joyous nor gloomy, but of resolute mind — a faithful lover in the cool courts of his Art; but now things once bright had faded. Faded was the word he used to himself. Reality bored him; regular habits irritated him and he broke them, as belonging to middle age. He felt both younger and older. Art was no longer his life, but the work of his life. He worked as well as ever and did not fail of imagination or craft; but he approached his business from a new point of view that changed its aspect temporally. This location was so complete that it brought a measure of dismay. Yet how infinitely splendid was the usurper! Love hovered about him like an aura and made all outside himself fairer than of old. He found himself more patient with other people, more sympathetic, inspired to look under the surface of his neighbours, disposed to feel more interest in the sorrows and joys of his narrow world.

For himself, however, there was no sympathy, but rather impatience and dissatisfaction. His life was like a garment that had seemed until now comfortable enough. But suddenly it became too small, too tight, shabby, suffocating — no attire for a man. To others, surely, it must also look too small, and therefore ridiculous, even contemptible.

As for the woman, she knew that he must soon ask her to marry him and waited for him to do so. Her emotions — far more complex than Mistley's, because they sprang from a far more complex situation — can only be analysed at a later opportunity. For the moment she knew very well that she loved him, and could not trust herself to think how much. Her favourite British painter was Constable, and Peter asked her to go for a long drive with him on a Sunday and visit the Stour valley and scenes of the artist's

activity. The enterprise had been long planned, and knowing very well what awaited her, Aveline consented to go.

He arrived at ten o'clock in a comfortable carriage with two horses, and Aveline stood on the step of Mrs. Hempson's home awaiting him. They drove away together through hedges draped with the wild hop, growing daily brighter as the fruit of blackberry, rose, and thorn ripened in scarlet and purple lustre by the way.

"We're going to Dedham," said Peter. "The river's fine there, and there's one of the finest churches in Essex — built, I suppose, when the place was more important than now."

The drive seemed short enough to them both, and their talk was, for the most part, of art.

"It's a perfect Constable day, heavy with coming rain. I'm glad you're going to see Stour Vale in the grey."

She looked at the sky.

"But not too grey — and don't say it's going to rain."

"Not till evening, I expect."

They came down the hill to Dedham at last, after slow trotting through many lanes. There they stopped at an inn, ordered luncheon, and walked to the river. It wound away, silent and shining, in long reaches, with expanse of flat meadowland on the eastern bank and willow trees to the west. At streamside grew great docks, and giant butter burr, whose flower was gone, but whose leaf patines lay heavy at the water's edge under scrub of pollarded alder. The south wind made a sighing in the grey willows and from time to time a lance-shaped leaf flashed down untimely to the water. In the meadows stood red and white kine, grazing. Some beasts roamed together to a fresh pasture; others lay chewing the cud, and Stour's slow stream made a mirror for them when they came to some shallow to drink. Here and there the wind found the face of the water and swept it into rough silver. They followed it a mile, only to see fresh reaches extending

onward to the sea. A low, sad-coloured sky hung over all.

"We'll turn now and go up stream, past the mill above the bridge," said Mistley. "The Stour is the northern boundary of the Tendring Hundred. It was made boat-able up to Sudbury in Queen Anne's time, I think; and then Manning-tree, a hamlet of Mistley, became famous for its fish trade."

"Is there a place called Mistley?"

"Rather — a very ancient spot. The word is the Saxon 'Mircel,' meaning 'herb Basil,' and 'ley' a pasture — at least, so some declare. It's Motteslea in Domesday. Mistley Hall has gone now, but there were great doings there in early Georgian days, when one Richard Rigby had it. Garrick and other actors and actresses used to visit there. Miss Reay must have been a great favourite of Rigby's, for he built her a 'tea-room' in the Tower at Walton-on-the-Naze. That's where the parson, Hackman, fell madly in love with her; but she couldn't return his passion, and so at Covent Garden, one fine night, the lunatic shot her dead on the stage. They hanged the reverend gentleman for his trouble. The fool deserved it."

"I don't know," doubted Aveline. "How can we say what he deserved — without knowing her?"

"You've always got an excuse for everybody," he said.

They turned and went up stream, past a great corn mill, where a ribbon of Stour's silver was deflected. It vanished, then spouted out again in a cataract, formed a wide, still pool, and so slid back to the river. There was a little lock for barges also. A cottage stood here, its angle worn raw to the red brick by the tow-ropes. Boats might be hired on the river, which Peter well knew; and taking one, he helped Aveline in, then rowed slowly up stream. Into still reaches Mistley rowed, and the moorhens and dabchicks scuttered away before them with fleeting trails of darkness on the shining surface of the stream.

She spoke of painting, and saw Corot rather than Con-

stable at every bend of the river. Then he rested on his oars, let the boat glide into the bower made by a willow, and asked her to marry him.

She knew him so well now that the actual proposition appeared almost unreal. It seemed to her that it had all happened before. She was positive that, when he took the boat, he meant to speak before he left it; and when the great willow hove in sight, she felt he would row under it and tell her he loved her. She guessed what he would say; and he did say nearly what she expected him to say. And she, loving him with infinite love, answered as he hoped she would answer, though he knew no more than what her eyes told him of the things hidden in her heart. For she had fought her battle long before, and found her love cried like a child for him and was great enough to wed him, not great enough to refuse.

He spoke simply, with no flowers of speech; but the tone of his voice was all she cared to hear, for that rang more musically than any word he uttered, and his imploring eyes would have won her without speech at all and brought her into his arms.

Yet when he had asked her, humbly enough, if she could share his quiet and humdrum life with him and let him spend the rest of it in making her life completely happy, she longed, like a wild thing in a cage, for a loophole. Not for her sake, but for his, she desired it. A fleeting resolution to tell the truth about herself touched her. Her lips even framed the confession; but it died upon them.

"I will come to you," she said, "if you want me. I love you — oh, how dearly I love you, Peter!"

Her mind flew far away from him as she felt him swallow up her hand in his and then cover it with kisses. Her thoughts ranged into the reality of things behind her, and then, absurd and irrelevant as a dream, the face of William Ambrose rose in front of her and she remembered a little of what he had said when last they met. "Don't think being wedded and being married are the same, because they

are not." So had that ruin of a man declared; and knowing marriage, Aveline would have been thankful to wed without it. But what did Peter know of marriage, or marriage without wedding, or wedding without marriage?

He could only look at her speechless for a time, but with a reverence in his eyes that made her heart sick. She longed for him to talk and chatter, and paint the future and banish the darkness in her soul. She yearned that the present at least might escape the necessities ahead; she thirsted for the opening of heart, the confidences now vital. But while he kept silent, as one stunned by the immensity of his good fortune, her quick brains were occupied with all the tissues of reservation she must soon be spinning, the half-truths she must substitute for whole truths, the prevarications, the evasions. Again her spirit sank, and the future seemed to beckon with unlovely hand. It was natural that the line of least resistance should arride her; for those who are fond of saying pleasant things to others, prefer to say pleasant things to themselves; but truth was far too terrific to be uttered now. She temporised with her soul and promised it the truth at a later period. But she knew that if passage of time and falling of events combined to make her comfortable without truth, then she would never utter it.

They returned, and the victor gripped Stour deep to his paddle and sent the skiff flying down stream again. Then they ate together in a little room at the inn. They left the event of the day alone for a time and pretended to talk as they had talked before it. They said the same sort of things; but each knew the other was laughing at them. The currency of speech, that had been gold to them, seemed tinkling brass before the new coinage from love's mint awaiting circulation. After dinner they went to look at the church, deserted at that hour, and there, in a little sheltered place by the sanctuary, he put his arms around her and kissed her. She responded tenderly to the embrace.

"I never felt so like going on my knees," she whispered.

"My heart has been on its knees all day," he said.

They drifted apart presently and she looked at one or two of the cenotaphs upon the walls. Then they went out again and soon returned to the carriage, which now awaited them.

"We'll drive back slowly by way of Stratford, and stop at Stratford Bridge," said Mistley to their driver presently.

CHAPTER XVI

THE DRIVE HOME

THE river flowed as of old, and many fair houses stood beside her windings; but the ancient mills were gone, and less attractive buildings had taken their places on Stour bank.

Their talk strayed back to the passing hour, and the panorama through which they moved formed a sort of beautiful frame to the real picture.

"Constable's mill wheels and weirs are only immortal in his work," said Aveline. "How he would have hated these ugly things that have sprung up instead."

"Beauty won't stand still," answered Peter. "Time, that makes a thing beautiful, goes on and defaces what it has created. The new always triumphs, and the new is often ugly to contemporary eyes. But I suppose, if we had the spirit of the forerunners, we should be prophets for the new and see how beautiful it is. I believe everything, and every person has a beautiful phase."

"That's too puzzling a theory to follow. But the new can't kill the spirit of Stour Vale — its own, its very own peculiar spirit of calm. Even to-day — such a stormy day, Peter — can't kill it for me. I never saw such a peaceful river. I'm sure nothing would ever make Stour angry, or dangerous. She couldn't show her teeth, or get into a temper. It's an unchanging thing — beautiful for ever, despite time."

"It's changing every moment; but it links one up with unchanging things," he granted. "It's the eternal change that keeps it all changeless, really. The trees and the smooth water, the grey sky, the reed bed there, with its

silky song and purple plumes all shining out again; and the old autumn signals flashing aloft on the elms."

"The trees and river don't change, and the seasons tramp on still," said Aveline; "but the people change, and all they stand for."

"Only their manners and customs — not their hearts."

"Their very hearts, I tell you. Their manners are no more than their clothes — hung on outside. But their hearts are different — harder, harder. My heart's harder than my mother's ever was: your heart's harder than your father's ever was. In the church just now I saw a monument put up by daughters to their mother. The daughters thanked their mother for the good that was in them; they blessed their mother for the virtues they had won from her. That was the old English way girls' hearts beat once. How many living daughters reverence a mother so?"

"Didn't you feel like that to your mother?"

"Never; did you?"

"My mother died when I was born," he told her.

They drifted back from things to ideas, according to their custom. Unseen he had her hand held tight in his own while he spoke, and she often pressed his fingers.

"All spirits of nations are made up of hardness and sentiment," he said, "and the ingredients are never mixed the same in any two, so there's eternal confusion and misunderstanding between them. Take ourselves — the inexorable, unconquerable spirit we hide under laughter, even in the shadow of death, makes other nations stand aghast at us. Our lack of imagination bewilders our friends and wakens simple hatred in our enemies; and yet I believe it's that very lack of imagination has made England do deeds that beggar imagination. Other people try to understand us and fail. But we never try to understand ourselves: that would be too imaginative. We just go grinding on, rebuking and inquiring and grumbling and belittling and cursing one another, crying out to the world that we are

unready, ill governed, lacking control, at odds among ourselves; and all the while, under the criticism and depreciation, proving to the world that we are the surest, sanest, strongest people in it."

"And we've got imagination, too," said Aveline, "or we shouldn't laugh at the Germans and answer their hymns of hate with chaff. To me they seem — not human — more like penguins, or some creatures just near enough to humanity to awake ridiculous and horrible images. It's like the beings from Mars in the *War of the Worlds*. They're outside mankind. But the Martians were so far outside as to be awful, the Germans are so near as to be absurd."

"Presently for their 'God punish England,' we shall be saying, 'Man heal Germany,' " foretold Peter.

"Which will make them angrier than all the hate in the world."

And so they prattled in the sunshine of their great adventure and set the earth right. But soon they came back to themselves.

"There's a difference between us," he said. "I've never loved before, but you have."

"You can set your mind at ease about that," she replied. "I thought I loved my husband, or I should never have married him; but it wasn't love: I know that very well now."

"He loved you though?"

She hesitated.

"The power to love was left out of him. That wasn't his fault. So many people can't love — half the people that marry can't love: they don't know how to. And even when they've got the power, it's just a chance if the one they marry can develop it. And the stages of love aren't always the same on both sides, Peter. In a man, interest may have just quickened into hope, while the woman's interest hasn't quickened at all. Or she may have run far ahead, from interest through hope into love, while perhaps

he's only just beginning dimly to realise what's happening to him."

It began to rain on the way home and Mistley stopped and had the carriage closed. He was glad, for now he could put his arms round her and kiss her. He talked of the honeymoon.

"We'll go abroad," he said, "and our honeymoon shall wait till after the war."

"Our wedding too?"

"No, no, no! But for the rest — one hasn't heart."

"Let it be Rome," she begged; but he shook his head.

"I can't stand Rome — it's too sad if you know how to feel. Imperium Romanum gone! Nothing left but a museum, and the best part of that under the paw of the Unclean Animal. The Pope can look at Belgium and Serbia and Armenia and be silent — for Austria's sake — think what that means! No, the thing that poisoned Rome makes Rome hateful to me."

"Do you really hate anything?" she asked.

"A humanist must hate the Church of Rome," he declared. "The Eternal City is only a dust-heap for antiquaries to crawl on now. I've studied the art of Greece and Rome there. I've walked in the Vatican and seen the Venus of Cnidus in her tin petticoat. That's a type and symbol — that tin petticoat. We'll go to Florence, where the Renaissance was born. Florence is Florence still; Rome is only the remains of a meal on the plate of Time — broken bones. Florence is the place of pictures, anyway — pictures and gardens."

"Gardens are pictures when you make them," she said. "To make a garden is to make a painting with living colours — to paint with living things. And you can say what the plants will be doing in your picture each month of the year. So your picture isn't one, but many."

"I believe you could design a garden that would make my best worthless by comparison."

She laughed, but thought that, working together, they might make a beautiful thing.

"Art's all observation and imagination," he declared, "and some say that observation is the first business of an artist; but observation without the other thing is a train of gunpowder without a match. Imagination does the vital trick: it knows what to keep and what to leave out. Observation doesn't know what to leave out. When Meredith went through his masterpieces again, his imagination cut out any amount of wonderful things that his observation had stored up — a lesson that for all artists in any medium."

The event of the day was showing Mistley to her in a new light. He appeared exhilarated as though with wine. He took the lead; his mind moved swiftly; his face shone; he laughed and chattered — rare things for him to do. Yet his joy made her ache the more.

She was glad when the journey ended and she found herself at Mile End again. He had subsided before that, and she wondered, with her arms round him in a parting embrace before the horses stopped, if his mood had sprung of the day and would never return, or whether she would find him a new man henceforth, transformed from anxious suitor to rapturous lover.

"It has been the happiest, happiest day I ever spent," said Aveline. "And the most fearfully unhappy," her spirit murmured to her even as she spoke.

"Then what must it have been for me?" he asked.

Another morning had dawned before the woman slept. She spent the night in retracing the past and noting where she had erred. There was much in her life that her future husband could never share — so it seemed to her. Yet she questioned the conclusion and argued against it. Fear was the determining factor, and she decided that to tell him the truth now must surely be to lose him. Immediately on this conviction, her mind began arguing against it. The truth might lift their union to a higher plane and con-

secrete it in a manner that nothing else could. But that depended on him, and despite his contempt for conventionality and the gregarious instincts of self-preservation common to all herds, if faced with her knowledge, he might well find his love threatened. For he would inevitably ask himself, if not her, why she had not told him sooner — why she had reserved facts so vital until after his proposal.

She felt her whole soul poured out for Peter now and dared not lose him. She remembered where first she met Margery Mayhew and understood the reality of a situation that at the time appeared theatrical and absurd. Real love could never be absurd; and yet the thing she now determined to do was absurd. Even her values — values which had made her cling in self-defence to extremes — did not justify her, and she knew it. But the temptation struck at her weakest spot — an indifference to veracity. She took refuge in Mistle's agnosticism and deluded herself into hoping that because he championed free thought, he might condone lawless action. She knew that she was a fool even while she argued thus.

So, like a squirrel in a cage, she went round and round and got no more forward. Her circle of reasoning only completed itself again and again; and it was inevitable that her conclusion should be postponement of all statement until she had wedded Peter. She even won a measure of satisfaction from this conclusion. It had a bright side. With an inverted logic, only to be appreciated by one who knew the premises, she assured herself that, after all, in the worst event, it was she and not Mistle who would be called to suffer. She was mentally exhausted before reaching this point of her introspection; otherwise she must have perceived that in the light of his love for her, her sufferings would certainly be his. Indeed she had gone too far now. Whatever the future might hold in store for them, the truth must make him suffer. Lifelong concealment of the truth, however, if practicable, was not calculated to pain Aveline. Henceforth her anxiety would centre in the

need for concealment, not in the torment of it. At least the man should know what love was; and since she most honestly adored him, she believed her genius would soon weld them together in such fashion that not even the stark ray of truth itself would have power to burn them apart again.

CHAPTER XVII

SAMUEL MUSHET'S HOLIDAY

THE long delayed visit of Samuel Mushet to his brother was paid at last. Not on a Bank Holiday did he come, but on a late day of August. Then he arrived at Colchester with Nancy, his wife. Gregory had also arranged to make holiday, though he knew the greater part of it would be spent in the gardens of "Colneside."

Margery met her uncle and aunt at the station, and Mr. Mushet greeted them at the front gate of "Fair View Villa." Everything was spick and span, and Nancy uttered the words of praise that her brother-in-law expected.

"A treat for the orderly mind," she said, "and a great lesson to Margery to be brought up and live in such a home."

"It will be hers some day, if she behaves," explained Mr. Mushet; "that is, when I'm called to my heavenly mansion."

"Your heavenly mansion will be an eye-opener, Greg," said Samuel, who was on the best of terms with his brother.

"It will," promised Gregory, "though sometimes when I think upon it, I'm puzzled to know how I shall go one better."

"You'll see it all from the heavenly standpoint then," declared Nancy, "when you're lifted to eternity, you'll have a larger pattern of ideas."

"And more room," added Samuel. "You look at this house much as I look at my marine engines on the *Peewit*," he continued. "I'm very well content with them, for they're perfect in their way, and wit of man couldn't better fit a thing to the work wanted; but if by God's will I'm

allowed to handle steam in the life beyond death, then I naturally look to see myself in command of something with more to it."

"There'll be work no doubt," said Gregory, "but it isn't for us to say what work, and it shows rather a narrow view to think we shall only be gardeners and engineers in the Better Land."

"All the same, you can't think of it without gardens and engines," argued Mr. Mushet of Brightlingsea; "and if gardens and engines, then skilled, angelic angels to run 'em."

"You're wasting time to let the mind dwell on it," answered Gregory. "All I know is that I shall do my duty and get advancement there. You and me can face the future with perfect confidence, knowing that in the next world we shall be done by as we do."

They ate an early dinner, after which it was proposed to spend a long afternoon in the gardens.

"I've told Bultitude you're coming, and he's going to show you the propagating house himself," promised Gregory. "In rearing of plants that man has no equal, and he'll show you some wonders of Nature. And old Pettikin must be spoke to, for he remembers you very well, and would be hurt in his feelings if you didn't pass the time of day with him."

While they ate, Samuel told how his son prospered with the Royal Engineers, and Nancy's eyes smouldered when she thought upon it.

Gregory uttered words that he had heard in a sermon respecting the cleansing and purifying of the nation.

"To be cleansed in the life-blood of our children is a pretty devilish bath, if you ask me," said Nancy aflame; "and to hear safe old men and bishops talk so, makes me ——"

"Hush, hush," murmured Samuel. "Gregory don't mean anything like that."

"The world that can only be kept sweet by the loss of

its young manhood is all wrong and rotten," she said, "and every woman's heart feels it, and every mother's heart knows it, and men ought to blush to look into our eyes."

"That's pretty much what Andrew Hempson says," declared Margery. "He's a second lieutenant now, and came to see his mother yesterday. But he says we've let the world slip into this mess with our eyes open, and now we've got to pay the cost of getting it out again. And what maddens him is that they who pay the piper won't call the tune. That's how he puts it. He says that our rulers and parliament men, who might have nipped this thing in the bud ten years ago, if they'd been worth their salt, will be the very men to make the peace; and he doesn't trust one of them with the peace."

They talked and argued according to their lights. Then Margery and Nancy left the men, and the elder spoke with great respect of Samuel's wife.

"For all she dressed me down so sharp, I have a great opinion of Nancy, and always did have," he said. "But there's a narrowness in the Quaker point of view and that can't be denied; because, if they had their way and took it lying down, what's going to become of England, themselves included? Needs must when the devil drives, and the devil's drove Europe into this, and the devil will take the hindmost, according to his custom. And England ain't going to be the hindmost, according to hers. So we've got to fight — even to the most peace-loving among us. But Nancy has a very clear mind for a woman. And no doubt you've been a happier man, speaking generally, along with her than you would have been without her."

"Speaking generally, as you say, I have," admitted Samuel, without any great enthusiasm. "She's one in a thousand, and I'm lucky; but the very best woman ever born can't see life with a man's eyes, or take the long look. Their minds get entangled in details and won't see the wood for the trees. They're born so. And after long

experience I reckon it's a great art for a man to live with his wife, Greg. I love Nancy and think the wide world of her, and yet, to you I say this: that to have lived under the same roof as her for five-and-twenty years is the cleverest thing that I've ever done, or shall do."

Gregory nodded.

"I see the point," he said. "It's a rare gift in you, and there's no doubt the fact that man and wife are always called to live in each other's laps after marriage, complicates the state."

They set forth to the gardens and spent two hours in wandering through the radiant acres of "Colneside"; then they met Mr. Bultitude and, at his invitation, visited the great propagating house — a vital factor in the economy of the nurseries.

Along one side of this important chamber, under a roof of glass, stood pots and pans of choice seedling primulas. Their thousands crowded the stage; many were known to science; many were come straight from collectors in the Sikkim Himalaya and had yet to declare themselves.

"Often the men out there can only get the seed," explained Mr. Bultitude, "and so we don't know what we've got, for they may not be able to send descriptions, or pictures of the bloom."

The gardener-in-chief beamed over his myriads.

"Like children, you may say," he declared to Mrs. Mushet. "Thousands of children grow up not worth sending to market, so to speak; but they're reared with patience and loving kindness; and, mind you, you can't draw a line through the parents either, no matter how well you know 'em, for Nature's got her own way, and twice two ain't four by any means when you're dealing with a hybrid. You may have a famous father and a famous mother, with their place secure in the gardeners' lists, but it don't follow that their offspring are going to be famous. Of course you may get a thing that collectors

will buy at your own price; but far oftener you'll only find a plant for the rubbish heap."

"Progeny's a doubtful item, though the childless never seem to know their luck," said Gregory.

The choicer saxifrages were propagated here, and new hybrids already opened tiny rosettes in fairy pots marshalled by the hundred.

"Just the same with plants," continued Bultitude. "The spirit of a raising house is hope. You mix hope with the leaf mould and the water; and though forty years of crossing would chasten a flint, yet hope is just as bright in me to-day as when I was three years old, and planted a clay marble and thought it would grow to a glass one."

"Every human pair that weds feels the same," said Nancy.

"Humans are always hybrids, so far as their higher parts are concerned," answered the expert; "for no two members of the species are just alike outside, or in, and so it follows, in my opinion, seeing that Nature works the same all round, that as you can't expect more than one or two good blends in every thousand seedlings, so you can't expect more than one or two good blends in every thousand children."

"But the bringing up—the bringing up, my dear man!" cried Mrs. Mushet. "You go too far, and it don't hold. These green things haven't got Christian parents, nor yet Christ waiting with His Hands stretched out to 'em! The human boy and the human girl have a lot more than the blood in their veins to depend upon."

But Mr. Bultitude doubted.

"'Tis the blood, ma'am," he answered. "A man's character, like a plant's, is in his blood, and training can't sweeten that if it is bitter by nature, no more than training can fill a head that Nature's planned empty. I say you can't get a grape from a thorn, but you may get a thorn from a grape, for the natural tendency is to throw back, I reckon."

"A very gloomy thought, however," said Samuel Mushet. "It don't hold with oysters, anyway; give 'em what they like and keep their enemies away, and they'll come true to type."

"Life's full of riddles," answered Mr. Bultitude. "But I say that half the subjects that we argue about, and wrangle about, and get hot about, will solve themselves in course of time, and a man has only got to live sixty years in the world to see many and many a thing his mother and schoolmaster taught him for gospel truth blown sky-high by new knowledge."

Opposite the seedlings stretched the great frames for cuttings. Three feet above ground there extended a plain of white silver sand, a yard broad and nearly thirty yards long. Glass lights on hinges covered it, and each section could be opened and examined separately. On this little, close plateau millions of cuttings had been struck by Mr. Bultitude in the course of many years. The present stock might have numbered ten thousand or more. They stood here in rows — living fragments of every shape, and nearly all so small that three hundred could stand on a square foot without crowding. Yet an air of vigour and prosperity marked their tiny groves.

"The secret with cuttings is to take them at the right time," said Mr. Bultitude. "Not too soon, not too late. My touch tells me when the stuff they are made of is ready."

He plucked a few atoms up from the pure sand and showed delicate filaments, fine as silken threads, already hanging from the stem.

They left the old man presently with thanks for his attention, and returned to the gardens. Nancy wanted to see a famous hedge of lavender, worth the rest of the collection, in her opinion.

Then appeared the ancient Mr. Pettikin. He had seen Samuel once in the past and entertained great admiration for him. Now he dropped his weeding hoe and shook

hands with the engineer and Nancy. He was very aged, but Mr. Ambrose let him come when he pleased. So he still pottered in the gardens and earned a few shillings a week. He was bald, with a ghostly white beard, from which time had long plucked the substance. His eyes were dim and one was shrouded by a grey film. His face had fallen in upon a toothless mouth and wore an inquiring expression, as though nearly a century of years had failed to provide him with any rudimentary meaning to existence.

"Very glad to see you again, Mr. Mushet, sir," he said; "and if this is Mrs. Mushet, I'm very glad to see her also."

"Tell her all them interesting things you told me, Mr. Pettikin," suggested Samuel.

"So I will then," answered the ancient, and turned to Nancy.

"I'm eighty-eight and all my race gone," he said. "Though an Essex man born, you must know, I was of a very ranging turn of mind in my middle years and went far afield — so far as Leeds."

"My — what a way to go!" said Mrs. Mushet.

"It was. I can't remember ezacally why I went; but it was along of horses. I was very understanding with horses, and I went, and I drove a pair for very rich people. And there I married, aged fifty-one years. I left my wife at Leeds — underground, you understand. God knows I wouldn't have left her any place else, for a better wife no man had."

"Any family?"

"One son, as ran away to sea. It troubled her; but were no loss to me, for he wasn't a nice boy, though I say it. Last of the race I am, for I doubt he's drowned. Twelve brothers I had — all gone, and sisters all gone. There might have been four or five girls — I can't mind 'em now. Loved horses I did. Could make 'em do everything but talk. And for that matter they did talk to me in their own simple language."

"I'll warrant you understood them, Mr. Pettikin."

"If you're kind to them, they're kind to you. A horse does as he's done by in a very Christian spirit. My old people wouldn't let anybody drive 'em but me. Master was ninety-two when he went and I drove the hearse — wouldn't let anybody drive him but me, you see, dead or alive."

"You'll live to be as old as him, I shouldn't wonder," said Samuel.

"I shouldn't wonder if I did," declared Mr. Pettikin. "I'm very careful, for I want to live, though if you was to ask me why, I couldn't tell you. Exercise the bones and they'll hold together and you live; pamper 'em and they'll fall apart and you die. I get up every morning at five o'clock and hot my drink, and I go to bed at dark, or soon after."

"You must have seen a lot of changes," said Samuel.

"I must," admitted Mr. Pettikin; "but I take no count of 'em; I just go on weeding out the weeds. I dare say, if it could be known, I've weeded out more weeds than any man in Essex. There's Richard Bare, a young man still; he's weeded a lot of weeds, but not so many as me."

Samuel Mushet felt in his pocket and brought out a leather purse. He opened it and seemed surprised. Then he presented the aged gardener with half-a-crown, and expressed great pleasure at meeting him again.

"And if ever you go as far as Brightlingsea, mind you come in and see us," said Nancy.

"Thank you, Mrs. Mushet, ma'am, and I will do so; and long life to you and your good man also," said Mr. Pettikin. "I'd always hoped to see him again, and I'm very pleased it's happened."

They left him, and Samuel spoke to Mrs. Mushet as they returned with Gregory to tea.

"Did I give you a fi'-pun note at the station?" he asked.

"No," she said. "You gave me nothing."

"Then I'm very sorry to report I've lost it," declared Mr. Mushet ruefully. "Looking in my purse a minute

ago for a trifle for that old man, I missed it; but it must have broken loose after I took the railway tickets at Brit-tlesea, without a doubt."

"Oh dear, oh dear, that's serious," declared Nancy.

"Hope for the best," advised Samuel's brother.

"I was a bit rattled at the ticket office by a lot of sol-diers," explained the engineer. "The fine men caught my eye and I didn't look after the business in hand."

"You may get it back yet if some honest person picked it up," said Margery; but Samuel felt small hope. He relapsed into gloom, harped on his misfortune, and rather spoiled the tea. Gregory appeared callous, and showed a certain amount of indifference to his brother's trouble.

"It all depends on the spirit you take it in," he told Nancy. "If you look at it as interest for a whole year on a hundred pounds saved, then, I grant, it seems a bit serious; but when you think England's spending a lot more than five pounds a second, then it looks small."

Gregory and their niece saw husband and wife to the station presently, and they departed with expressions of pleasure and gratitude at their entertainment.

CHAPTER XVIII

HELENA'S PICNIC

THERE came a day, long desired, when Geoffrey Seabrook joined Mrs. Ambrose at Mersea and went for a picnic with her. He made an early start by the motor omnibus from Colchester, and enjoyed a ride on the top of that vehicle to West Mersea, where the lady awaited him in snowy white serge, with a white yachtsman's hat, a veil as blue as Demeter's, and a parasol to match it. Both brought additions to the feast, and Seabrook, who was in grey flannels and yellow boots, had his hands full as they proceeded to the Blackwater estuary, whence the start was to be made. A maze of land and water spread here, the marshes being protected from the sea by dykes and the saltings extending into the mud of the estuary and suffering tidal submersions.

"Old Adam Wyde is going to row us out to the creek where he has his oysters," explained Helena. "Then we shall land and roam away together for the day, and he'll go about his business and come back for us in the evening."

"I wish he'd forget to," declared Geoffrey. "Fancy being marooned with you on the marshes!"

"We can think of something nicer than that," she said. "And mind you pay attention to Adam. And if it ever came out we'd been here, as it may, then Adam is the excuse. The Wydes have belonged to Mersea ever since men had names, I believe. He preaches in the chapels — a fanatic, but quite amusing. He's said to know all Milton by heart, and I dare say he does."

"Sounds rather dull," murmured Geoffrey; but Helena assured him the fisherman was anything but dull; and then

they descended the beach and found Adam and his boat at water's brink.

Mr. Wyde was tall and powerful, with a Roman nose, red-brown face and grizzled, red-brown hair. His grey eyes were small and penetrating, his moustache and beard were cropped close to his face. He wore no hat or coat, and his blue linen shirt had no collar, but was fastened with a brass stud. Helena greeted him in friendship, and he relieved Geoffrey of the parcels.

"Adam's got a fishery of his own," explained Helena, "and you can't beat his oysters. You're to take some home with you to-day."

"My oysters are a bit green in the beard this year," confessed Mr. Wyde. "It's a pity there's a prejudice against it, for the fish ain't a penny the worse. In fact, there was a time when green-bearded oysters were the fashion. We've got a bit of rotten shell among us too. 'Tis a boring sponge that does it, and the oyster shell gets soft and can't be exported without smashing. They won't take 'em at Ostend, though this year it's no great matter, because all foreign trade's shut down and not an oyster is leaving the land."

Overhead a pride of herons circled and soared. The sun beat down and Helena gave Geoffrey a little shade from her parasol. They passed other boats hanging about the little peninsulas of mud and sedge with fishermen at their trawls; and then they reached the flats above Adam's own layerings. The tide was low, and the islets and banks of earth shone above it, their purple pelt of the sea lavender bright under the sunshine. Red and white butterflies danced over the flowers.

Mr. Wyde brought his boat ashore and, without any ado, picked up Mrs. Ambrose and carried her over five yards of slime and ooze to dry ground; but Geoffrey, who mourned for his yellow boots and would have liked to be carried also, was left to make the best of his way to land.

"I'm going to look at some new wholves¹ in my oyster pits," said Adam, "and then I'm going back to Mersea City. And at five of the clock I'll be here for you. This is an island at high tide, and don't you walk too far inland, else you won't be able to get back to it."

He left them and they strolled away to seek shade and seclusion. Above the marshes rose protecting banks, and within these earthen walls spread miles of grazing ground. Here and there in the midst stood a clump of trees, while sheep and cattle roamed over the wide meadows, or clustered beside a water-hole where rushes spattered their dark green upon the grass. Fences ran here and there to separate the pastures; but the land was so low that only a streak of the distant sea ran above the banks, and while the sails of an occasional oyster ketch, or barge, loomed over the green dykes, their hulls might not be seen.

The lovers talked together as they walked, and Helena told of the joy with which she had anticipated their little holiday.

"How heavenly it will be when we can escape for a week together," she said.

His eyes were on a pumping-house in the deserted fields.

"The very place," he declared. "We'll find some shade there, anyway. I've brought you a bottle of that sparkling moselle you love."

"Angel!"

Seabrook lacked wisdom, but was rich in wisdom's bastard brother, cunning. She talked of the subjects that interested her erotic mind, and his point of view appeared.

"The platitudes you hear about love are so wearisome," she said. "A woman I know, who wants a man and can't get him, says she believes that yielding is the surest way of winning him, body and soul. Whereas nine times out of ten it's the siege and not the conquest that is the fun for you wretches."

¹ *Wholves*, sluices.

"Because sieges vary and conquests are more or less alike," said Geoffrey. "But that's not love as it came to me and you."

"No, no — we're not love-hunters."

"A man who is really loved," he assured her, "has won an ally second to none in the world. That means something beyond the ken of those sensual fools — men or women — you call love-hunters. We found each other, and that meant that we found the best the earth had for each other. Sit down on my coat. This shade's heaven."

They called a halt, and he dropped the lunch and went on talking.

"I number over the things you mean to me — the Good, the Most High, the Complete Satisfaction, the All-Embracing, the Rain, the Sun, Inspiration, Refuge, Sanctuary — all that and ever so much more — Food, Drink, the Bread of Life and the Wine of Life."

"You're a darling! I wish I was half you think me."

She came and sat on his lap, and he caressed her.

"How long is your husband going to be away?" he asked.

"I don't know. He'll soon be bored and come home, unless commissions brighten things for him."

"Thank God we're patient and can look a long way ahead. But sometimes my heart sinks. He's the sort of well-regulated man that ——"

Geoffrey broke off, while Helena played with his ear and stroked his hair.

"To him you are just a wife," said Seabrook, "just a wife in the most dismal acceptance of the term. To me, you're the brightest manifestation of all that's vital and sublime and unique. He thinks the world of you, too; but then what is his idea of the world? He's not mentally built to measure you, or receive what you can give. For you to live with him is like playing a Bach fugue to a baby. It's I — outside in the cold — who know the mean-

ing of the Bach fugue — not he who lives in the same house with the music.”

“I’m all yours to-day, every inch of me, you precious lover! And always. There’s nothing quite like you in the world. You’re a phoenix, and so many-sided — so perfectly practical and so perfectly romantic. A woman can be both, of course, but there’s not another man in the world but you can be.”

“I doubt if women can be both,” he said. “Most of them make themselves think they’re romantic; but jolly few women really are after thirty.”

“Experience teaches them,” declared Helena. “They find that the romantic men don’t wear well, and that the practical ones pay best. So they adapt themselves. That’s what is so wonderful in you. You’re a poet and yet so self-possessed and self-controlled and — and — almost businesslike.”

“We’ve got to keep awake, both of us. If we didn’t, we might find reality clashing into our romance a little too sharply to be pleasant.”

“I know, that’s almost the most wonderful thing of all — to make me feel absolutely safe, as you do.”

He smiled.

“Love sharpens the wits. Men cooling in love grow careless. That’s the beginning of the end and a danger signal for the woman. I love you better every day of my life — so you are as safe as any sweetheart on earth, because the very edge and sharpness of my brain is sacred to you.”

“You triumph over difficulties so amazingly — oh, I adore you for it, and am never tired of wondering.”

“I see the danger-points, and keep clear of them. Do you know what I used to fear before I found that you were as wise as you are precious? At first I speculated sometimes if I should ever be in the beastly fix of having to pick a quarrel with my master, or fall out with my mistress — a pretty choice of evils. But you soon showed me that fear

was vain. We're pretty clever, both of us; and our trump card lies in this, that we both respect and admire Mr. Ambrose so highly. On his own plane, he is an admirable man. It's not pretence in the least when I praise him."

"There are times when I hate him awfully — when he patronises you, that's the worst. It makes me mad."

"Don't let it do that. I like him to patronise me. It's only a question of your sense of humour. For the rest we must be patient and weigh our chances. People would say we were infernally cynical; but we're not: we've only got the will to live and the will to enjoy unusually developed."

He pressed her close to him and shut his eyes, like a cat rolling over in the sun.

"Don't let's think, let's feel — just feel we're in each other's arms, and happy and healthy," she purred.

"If you can balance thinking with feeling, you keep your dish of life upright and get the best out of both worlds," he said.

When Helena Ambrose entered this man's life, a deep understanding arose between them. They soon established the closest possible intimacy, and he was absolutely faithful, and intended to be so for the sake of the future. They looked far ahead and trusted each other.

Life and training had never put any conscience into Seabrook and he secretly ignored human values when they clashed with his own, but openly professed them at all times. He tried to make people think him old-fashioned, and most people did. But he only played hypocrite from necessity, not choice, and had wealth and independence been his portion, he would possibly have taken all that he could get without pretence. Need induced the vice, and from his schooldays he practised it and amused himself with his extraordinary skill in duplicity. It had now become second nature to him, and he was often devious for the love of being devious. He had native skill in estimation of character and delighted Helena by his display of it.

He made no miscalculations, and had thus far committed no error in their intrigue and inspired her to the same end. She was quick, and bettered his instruction, but lacked his absolute flair. He anticipated the least shadow of danger, and his precautions were such that caution never appeared to be necessary.

Helena laughed now, and reminded him of recent incidents.

"It's like playing billiards," he said. "The good player never leaves himself a difficult shot. There's only one danger in the world for us. As long as other people do what they ought to do, and keep in character and behave regularly, and don't go in for unrehearsed effects, nothing can ever floor us. We're safe as good motorists are safe, while everybody else plays the game. But nobody's proof against the idiot on the wrong side of the road. As long as people behave consistently, we are all right. Only an earthquake or a lunatic can give the show away."

"We must avoid earthquakes and lunatics, my dear genius," she said.

The sun was hot, and the grass was soft and sweet to lie upon. They talked no more and forgot everything but themselves. And a quarter of a mile away, hidden from them by the pumping-house, appeared two objects, not sheep or cattle, but a tattered man with a sack on his back and a sweltering woman, in whose straw hat stuck up a turkey's feather.

"I'm running away, like a bit of fat afore the fire," said "Marmalade Emma" to William.

"There's shade t'other side the pumping-house," he answered. "We'll camp there and empty the bottles and have a sleep."

They spoke no more and shambled along silently over the meadow. Emma gasped, and her tongue hung from the side of her mouth like a dog's. As they approached the promise of shade and ascended the hillock to the

pumping-house, the sound of a woman's laughter arrested them, and William held up his hand. Whereupon Emma stood still, and he, dropping his sack, went on all fours and crept to the angle of the wall.

A moment later his red, crapulous face was thrust round the corner. He pulled it back instantly, but Seabrook had seen him. Billy beckoned Emma, spoke to her, cleared his throat loudly once or twice and then, after fetching his sack, marched into the company of the picnickers.

"Nothing happens but the unexpected, does it?" he said. "Just come for a sun-bath, I expect, like me and Emma."

Seabrook only knew the pair by sight, but Helena had been friendly to them in secret on several occasions. She exercised presence of mind, expressed great regret at William's recent illness and hoped he was better.

"Dr. Carbonell told me you had consulted him," she said.

"Yes, I consulted him," answered William. "A very large-minded man for his age. I'm all right. Emma and myself are spending a bit of time on the saltings for our health's sake. Getting great good from it, ain't we, Emma?"

Emma's round eyes were fixed on Geoffrey Seabrook. She did not answer.

"Just a little picnic," explained Helena. "Mr. Seabrook and I ——"

But the utter futility of offering any explanation impressed her and she stopped.

"Loneliest place in Essex, too," grinned William. "Some people have no luck. If it's a picnic, you've got something to eat, and we're short in that direction. I've a drop of drink in my bag; but we're badly off for victuals."

"We're fed up with mushrooms, and there ain't much else here," said Emma.

Seabrook turned his attention to his parcels.

"Stop and have some with us, Emma," suggested Helena; but William declined.

"No, no — two's company. And Emma's terrible particular who she knows. How's brother Parkyn? In Scotland, they tell me — eating grouse and wearing a kilt, I suppose? Deer-stalking, perhaps? He'll bring you home a pair of fine antlers, I shouldn't wonder."

Seabrook heaped delicate food into Emma's apron and, ignoring the ribald William, sought to please his companion.

"Have some cigarettes, too?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"Nasty thing, cigarettes," declared William. "We're pipe smokers. Now we'll jog along. And don't you worry — you're all right. Mum's the word. We'll go back to the next pump-house, a mile off, where we sleep of a night."

"Have a drink before you go," proposed Geoffrey; but Emma declined.

"Not out of your bottle," she said.

"So long, my children; thank you for your hospitality. Good appetite — good luck! I'm sure he's a nice young man, Helena — can see that by the way he waxes his little moustache!"

For some time after William had departed the lovers said nothing at all. Helena was hysterical.

"Your little moustache! your little moustache!" she kept giggling, apropos of nothing.

Geoffrey arranged their luncheon and opened a bottle of sparkling wine.

"Drink," he said; "you want it."

She was woful presently and full of care; he pretended to more calm than he felt, and estimated the significance of this discovery.

The seasoning of their meal was not love, but a series of shrewd calculations. Helena had become vexed and pettish, and the man's first care was to restore her equi-

librium. He endeavoured so to do by making light of the incident.

"Luckily you've always been kind to the creatures. It may mean a little blackmailing; but if they start that, the only way will be to frighten them. You see nobody, last of all Ambrose, would take their word against yours; so even if they had the wish to hurt, they wouldn't have the power. But I doubt if they've got the wish to hurt."

"He might have the wish to hurt Parkyn, and he wouldn't care who else suffered. He hates Parkyn. That's the danger."

"I expect he's pretty shrewd."

"No he isn't — he's just a thing of impulse. He's dead to all decency; you could see that by what he said."

"We must discount him, then, and not make any secret of the picnic. The rest would merely appear to be the man's own enmity and malignance. Everybody knows the relations between him and his brother. Your husband, as I say, would not believe it for an instant. The beauty of our real friendship has been that not a soul on earth can point to the shadow of its existence."

But she was not so easily comforted.

"It looks to me just as though the very thing and the only thing that could wreck us has happened," she told him. "Not ten minutes before they came you had said that only a lunatic or an earthquake could wreck us — and now the lunatic's come."

But he would not allow this.

"He's not a lunatic, and if we treat him as a responsible person he'll behave as one. For the minute you must write to Mr. Ambrose and tell him I came along early with flowers for you, and you kept me and took me to see Adam Wyde. You must say we went on to the saltings, and met his brother and gave him some food. I shall write and mention the fact that you took me out to lunch. I believe he won't think of it again, and you'll soon see, when he

comes home, if there is anything to trouble us. Has that woman any control over William Ambrose?"

"How do I know? I suppose she has: she always crawls about with him."

"Well, don't worry before there's anything to worry about. I'm not going to take this seriously. The man's a gin-sodden creature, and a drunkard's memory is worthless to begin with. He won't be difficult."

Geoffrey talked and talked; but the day was spoiled, and they were not sorry to go back to the landing-place presently. Indeed they reached it some time before Mr. Wyde returned for them; therefore they sought him at his oyster pits on the mud banks. By this time Helena's ruffled feathers were a little smoother. She would not let Geoffrey go until he promised to come and see her again in three days, and secretly she intended to call at "Colneside" before that date. For his part Seabrook came to the conclusion that there need be no great cause for alarm. He decided to recognise the tramps and show friendship, if he came across them; but not to seek them. Helena would mention them in her letter to her husband, but Geoffrey knew that good taste demanded that he should not allude to the brother of Mr. Ambrose. For his part he would dwell on the pleasure of the day, the immense kindness of Mrs. Ambrose, and the interest of meeting such an intelligent and original fisherman as Mr. Wyde.

They found the old man by his pits, between which ran little pathways of crushed oyster shell.

"The wholves are very well done you'll be glad to hear," he told them, "and I praised the hand that repaired them. 'Always keep a good word for a good job,' is my motto, 'and don't spare blame for a bad one.' Here's some oyster shells I've picked up for you to see. 'German writing' we call that. It's a sea worm that builds on the shell and makes that scrawl over it — as hard as stone. In fact it is stone."

“Why German writing?” asked Helena; but Mr. Wyde could not say.

The scene had changed and, on the top of the tide, their boat soon floated over green banks of sea lavender and silver orache, now submerged. Helena looked down through the water and could see the flowers and grasses glimmering beneath it. Where butterflies had danced little fish now moved, and a very beautiful dark purple medusa palpitated in the crystal beside the boat. Others of less lovely colour swam in the sea also, with dark patterns painted upon their translucent domes.

“Stingers,” said the fisherman. “Don’t you touch ’em, Mrs. Ambrose, else you’ll suffer for it. I may tell you I’m pleased. For dredging just now, I fetched up some of my new Nore culch and found nice brood on it. And I’ve brought you a dozen good oysters for your supper, Mrs. Ambrose, hoping you’ll accept the same.”

Helena thanked him and whispered to Geoffrey —

“You shall have them: I never touch them.”

They landed presently, bade the fisherman farewell and walked up to the starting-point of the motor omnibus for Colchester. Soon Seabrook took his leave. He had won her smiles again before he departed, and went home on the top of the vehicle, thoughtfully damning the incident of the day.

CHAPTER XIX

WEDDED

EMMA and William discussed their adventure after leaving the picnickers.

"For two pins I'd show up that young dog to Parkyn," said the man. "It would be returning good for evil — that's the only objection."

"Helena Ambrose has always been very sporting, and we've had a good few half-sovs out of her on the quiet," answered Emma. "'Tis a master-bit of wickedness and all that, but you always do look all round a thing, and when you look all round that woman's life lived along with your brother, you feel 'tis a case for Christian charity. Goodstruth! Think of her — a man-eating sort of woman like her — doomed to live with her husband, and not a mite of comfort from year to year."

"I don't blame her for trying to get a bit of life into life. But the chap's fair game. He kept his nerve. He may be a fool, or he may not. We shall see. If he comes to me, he's a fool. If he don't, perhaps I shall go to him. I want a bit of money against the winter."

"Don't you do nothing mean like that. You ain't that sort. I expect he's nilly skeered in a fit about it, because he works at 'Colneside' and gets his bread from your brother. He must be a terrible deceitful young man — properly wicked, you might say. Perhaps, if he gets to know Mrs. Brown is painting my picture in the gardens next week, he'll offer to make friends."

For Emma had so far conquered William on Aveline's behalf that he consented to the proposed picture, and a week after the adventure on the saltings, she kept an ap-

pointment, sat down with her bundle in front of a mass of scarlet torch lilies and permitted her friend to paint her portrait.

William meantime took off his withered boots, washed his feet in a lily pond and then slumbered on a sunny bank. Seabrook was aware from Mistley that the pair were in the gardens; but he revealed no interest and made no effort to see them.

"The beggar was over at Mersea last week, when Mrs. Ambrose took me to see old Adam Wyde, and we gave him and that appalling woman half our lunch. However, she was picturesque. I expect Mrs. Brown will make a delightful drawing."

Since the announcement of his engagement, Peter Mistley had received many congratulations, and none more hearty than those of his colleague. The wedding was not to be delayed; indeed they only waited, at Helena's wish, until Mr. Ambrose should return; and then, to please the master rather than themselves, they agreed to be married in church.

Both desired a civil marriage only; but Mr. Ambrose argued with Peter and made such a point of it, that the draughtsman could not, without ungraciousness, refuse.

"If it were a matter of conscience I should be the last to raise the question," said Parkyn; "but my wife tells me that Mrs. Brown is indifferent, and I am sure you are not so narrow-minded as to feel any personal objection to our noble service, or quarrel with those who hold matrimony a solemn sacrament."

"We only want it as quiet as can be, Mr. Ambrose."

"That is your affair. But my wife and I will attend the ceremony, if you have no objection."

"It is paying us a great compliment," said Peter. He had planned a brief holiday after the event; and Aveline begged for Cornwall, which pleased him well enough.

At church but few appeared, and behind the company, alone, sat Emma, under the turkey feather. Her eyes

were moist and she dreamed dreams, for she had grown to love Aveline.

She told William all about the service afterwards.

“They went straight away from the church door to the station,” she said; “but I flung my bag of rice over ’em and then hooked it before the gang came out. There was Margery Mayhew along with old Greg Mushet, and Helena, all ashimmering, in a gown like as if she’d rolled in a flower-bed, and your brother — just as usual. And that beauty you caught at Mersea — he was sitting down the church a hundred miles off, as if butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth. And she — Aveline — in silver grey, and a white feather to her hat — just a aingel in woman’s clothes. My Gord! she is a lovely piece! I hope he’ll be good to her. A dark-faced man, with straight eyebrows and stiff in the back; but ’andsome. I was a mark on the chap when he came out, and popped the rice all over him. He laughed, and she said ’twas nice of me to be there. They take the honey-month away West.”

At Penzance Mistley visited certain noble gardens without form but rich in notable plants; while Aveline rejoiced at the cliffs and the sea. They lived in a dream of absolute happiness, unclouded as far as he was concerned. With marriage she emptied nearly all her heart to him, yet found that the secret arcanum she had pictured as being thrown open at last, was now closed for ever. She hoped vaguely that it would never be opened at all, and yet, at the bottom of her mind, was a fixed conviction that it would. She soothed her soul by telling Peter many things that she could not tell him before their marriage.

They went to the Scilly Islands that they might see a very famous collection of plants; and, in the steamer, as they sat together and watched the sea, she spoke of the past.

“After we were married — the moment after — I knew he was no good to me — body or soul. Good to nearly

everybody, but not to me. You'd say I ought to have found that out sooner; but I didn't. The secret of the sex union is often an apocalypse to a girl. It ought to be a minor thing; but it isn't, and a maiden can't know before, and afterwards it is too late. I knew the day following my marriage that my husband wasn't the man I ought to share my life with. Being a man yourself, I suppose you can't understand what an insufferable, appalling sort of discovery that was. It nearly drove me mad, anyway. Our honeymoon was one long dreadful deceit on my part, and the more I knew this couldn't be love, the fiercer I fought to make it appear that it was. He didn't find it out; I don't think he ever did find it out — till I told him."

"What were the symptoms when you settled down to live with him?" asked Peter.

"Everything seemed incomplete, as if you began dinner and had to stop with the fish. I felt tremendous possibilities about me, if I only had food to make me strong enough for them. Spiritual food, I mean."

"No sympathy?"

"Plenty; but no understanding — and sympathy without that is bricks without mortar. He couldn't see and I couldn't explain, because no explanation would have made him see. You can't alter people by explaining them to themselves: you only alter their opinion of you. He was a very learned man, and so gentle that he wouldn't have hurt a fly. And yet he tortured me. So I starved and felt that, for nothing but simple starvation, I was not doing the little I might do."

"Didn't he like your pictures?"

"How could he? That was nothing. He had his own tastes, and if my pictures bored him, much that he enjoyed bored me. But those are outside things. He often did like my pictures and I was often interested in sides of his work. It wasn't that. It was his attitude to married life."

"You were made to be loved, and he didn't love you?"

"He thought he did. He was a model husband; but there's such a lot of difference between a model and a real thing, isn't there? No, he didn't love me, because he couldn't. Lots of people — women as well as men — think they are loving somebody, when all the time, they haven't got the power to do it. Love's no more given to everybody than any other gift. And what does a girl know about it before she feels it — or a boy, either? They're attracted: they like each other; they build up pictures of each other and think about each other and say, 'This is love. How wonderful — how tremendous!' They they're fearfully proud of each other for being in love with each other, and presently they marry; and then, if by bad luck one does really find out what love means, while the other goes ambling uneventfully on incapable of love — there you are — a tragedy."

"The only hope is for neither ever to feel the real thing," said Mistley. "Then you get a happy marriage."

"Neither, or both. If both do, then they can part like a gentleman and gentlewoman. But if one does and the other doesn't — if one knows it's all wrong and the other thinks it's all right ——"

"I wonder what you'd have done if your husband hadn't died?" he asked.

"Died myself," she said. "One of us had to die."

Presently she surprised Peter.

"You're like him in some ways — yes, you are; but oh, so gloriously unlike him, too."

The man felt a queer shadow, a chill — not for himself but for the dead. Peter unconsciously accepted the convention that to speak ill of the dead is unworthy. Aveline had not spoken ill of the dead explicitly; but it seemed to him that she was callous. He set it down to all she had suffered.

"The huge difference between you is that you can laugh, and that to you art is alive," she went on. "If we ever

quarrelled, you and I, we'd only have to begin talking of art to forgive each other in five minutes."

"Yet he cared for art?"

"Only in a deadly, archæological sort of way. He liked things in the same way that Dr. Corbonell likes them — for their bearing on history, not for their bearing on your heart and soul. Pottery and flint arrowheads never made him joyous; or if they did, he never showed it. He was born without imagination. Once I felt more sick of life than usual, and I wouldn't get up, and said I'd got a headache, because if I'd said I'd got a heartache he wouldn't have understood. Then came a wretched piano-organ outside the house and I jumped up naked and danced — just danced round and round my bedroom. And he came up with some dry toast and a cup of tea and caught me whirling about like a drunken bacchante. He thought I had gone mad. He began to talk to me gently and soothingly; but when I said I wasn't mad in the least, he became angry — angry for him, that is — and told me I was no longer a child. My God! I knew that well enough. What d'you suppose pained him most? He said, 'Think if the housemaid had come in!'"

"And what did you answer?"

"I told him housemaids don't come in without knocking."

Peter stroked her hand.

"Poor little chappie!" he said.

For her confidences Aveline won Peter's; but his life had been uneventful and for the most part devoted to work. He, too, was an orphan, and had no near relations. They shared only one skeleton, but that was as yet so far distant that it seemed small. There existed the possibility that Peter might be called to the army; yet for the present no demand had gone forth, and he laboured under no immediate sense that it was his duty to enlist. She, for her part, trusted that the need would not arise.

They lived in the passing hour, and the woman, with her

genius for subordinating painful thought, was happier than she had ever been; while he rejoiced as the sublime understanding grew between them, and the full splendour of a very perfect love swept like a dawn over wedded life.

From the first she took deep interest in his work and appreciated his theories. That she had indeed already done; but now he found that Aveline had no mind to look on from the outside. From mastering his principles, she brought her own artistic inventiveness to bear upon them, and though never once did she advance advice, or do more than praise what he had made, or intended to make, yet when he invited an opinion, or asked her to judge between alternatives, she hesitated not to do so; and it was not love that made him know she was right, but art.

"Now your every garden's a bit of myself, because it's a bit of yourself," she told him.

"The only mistakes you ever make," he said, "are because you haven't yet mastered the stuff I have to work in."

As intimacy ripened the woman noticed a new thing in the man — a manifestation of character that had seldom appeared during the anxieties of his courting. He grew now more genial, saw more humour in the world and displayed more humour in his own outlook. They often laughed together and she quickened his sense of the comic. But the war came nearer.

"You open my eyes wider every day," he said.

"Not I," she answered; "it's only your own feeling for justice. You see what a difference there is between two people who have got the best thing in the world and nearly everybody else. And you see what's the average luck of the average man and woman."

"Khaki's another colour now," he answered; but she had not meant that. Indeed she was quick to turn his thoughts from the war to the best of her power. Yet, from the height of his own triumphant happiness, he was too just to refuse the larger vision that it brought. The

war knocked at their door with bony fingers. The enemy flew by night above their new home; the men from France were coming and going in thousands. Peter began to spend some of his leisure with the wounded. He went shyly at first, much doubting his power to entertain them; but he persisted, and the experience proved valuable. The massive testimony of man after man accumulated and awoke in him a pride of country that the artist is often found to deprecate. He had been international in thought and feeling, he had held that the artist belongs to a commonwealth whose bounds extend beyond all lands, to embrace all peoples. But now he found in time of storm that it was a very great thing to be an Englishman; he took "the thunder of that ancient name upon his lips with reverence"; and Aveline shared his growing pride in the achievements of the kingdom.

Through this influence, and by many other channels, the inner natures of both ripened, while the bases of their united life grew broad and took firm root beneath the beauty of perfect relationship.

"I believe we're only beginning to know all that love really means," said she, after they had been married for six weeks. "It's like a heavenly flower just opening, Peter — every day seems to show another delicious petal."

CHAPTER XX

THE POPPY

MRS. JANE HEMPSON felt sorry for herself, and with reason. Since the departure of Aveline the widow had not succeeded in getting another lodger; and now her son was about to go to France with his regiment. He spent a few days with her before he started.

Neither was sentimental, but they loved one another, and the mother spoke of a matter near her heart.

"I don't hold with a lot of these young men rushing into marriage before they go abroad," she said. "In a good few cases it's a hysterical sort of business on both sides, and doubtfully fair to the State, because there's bound to be a cruel lot of these boys fall, and that means pensions that the nation may have to go on paying for more than half a century. But you ——"

He stopped her.

"Haven't you said enough to prove my case is just like all the rest? Granted that I'm older than these lads rushing into it, then so much the more reason I should have sense. And Margery ——"

"If you hadn't interrupted, Andrew, you'd have found there was no need to," replied Mrs. Hempson. "I'm not saying you ought to marry her — not for a minute — but I am saying you might get something definite before you go. You want it, and I've told you she wants it."

"That's what I can't believe," he said. "We're very good friends, and she knows I value her friendship; and she also knows that if things had gone right before the war, I should have asked her to marry me, when I came back. But they didn't, and they're not gloriously right

now, either. I'm doing my duty and that's all you can say."

"You make me despair," answered his mother. "Don't you know, even now, after all Mrs. Mistley told me and all I've gleaned for myself, that she can't be free, and that there's only one man in the world for her?"

"If I thought so I'd — I'd just touch on the subject and remind her of the understanding, to be special friends, that we had before I went to China, and ask her if it can stand while I'm in France."

"It's a cold-blooded sort of arrangement; but seeing what she feels and the slights she's had to suffer from you, no doubt it will be a glimpse of heaven for her," answered his mother scornfully.

The unimpassioned Andrew would not, however, grant this.

"You may say this and Mrs. Mistley may say that; but you can't be dead sure you're right, or know what's in her mind."

"Why don't you ask her what's in her mind, then, like any sane man would?"

"There again: I don't think that is within my right. She shall have a chance of telling me, however."

"You're so vague and shadowy that the poor wretch can't meet you half way and get down to something solid," said Mrs. Hempson.

He was smoking his pipe after an early breakfast.

"I'm going into Colchester now, for that matter."

"Well, I want a message to Margery, so you can take it. You'll catch her before she goes to 'Colneside' if you start at once. Tell her from me to call this evening; and tell her from yourself — But there, you're past praying for," answered Mrs. Hempson. "You properly lost your nerve in China, I believe."

"Then I hope I shall get it back in France," he said. "But I haven't lost my nerve. It all comes to her attitude to me, and I'll go a step towards finding out what

that exactly is, if I can do so without putting any unfair strain on her mind."

Jane Hempson watched him depart and shook her head. Andrew's line of action in this great affair appeared slovenly to his mother. But he was all of a piece, and a certain inexact outlook upon life appeared in this vague view of Margery. "She'll have to go a step or two out of her usual way to meet him, or nothing will ever be done," thought Mrs. Hempson; "and with her sensitive and high-strung and worked up to a nervous state at the thought of Andrew going, and with him rambling and doubtful, it's a very uncertain thing if they'll ever reach to certainty."

Andrew meantime went his way, entered presently the outer gate of "Fair View Villa" and found Margery in her garden. She had a little patch of ten square feet granted her by Gregory, and within that space she planted what she pleased. It was in a corner and did not interfere with Mr. Mushet's own stern horticulture.

She had her back turned, but heard his footstep and knew it very well.

They shook hands and he gave the message from his mother.

"I'll go, of course," she said.

"Gardening, I see?"

"Only making sure my garden is tidy. Uncle Greg lets me have it on condition I keep it as neat as his — and that's an effort. Did you ever see such a garden as his?"

"It reminds me of soldiers drilling, somehow," he answered. "I can't tell you why; but it's like a review — everything's presenting arms, as if it was being inspected."

She remembered a trifle, and a flush of colour came into her face, a look almost of fear into her eyes. She suggested a bird that tries to lure a prying stranger away from her nest. Her furtive eyes glanced down at her garden, and then she stood between it and the visitor.

"Come out to the gate. I must be off," she said.

"I know; so must I; but wait half a moment."

She stood helpless, divided between rejoicing that he should want to talk, and dread of a little secret only hidden from him by her person.

For his part he was wondering what to say, and took refuge in the past.

"When I drill my men, nowadays, I often wish that I'd had soldiers to help me when I was collecting plants, instead of niggers."

"If you'd had soldiers, you wouldn't have failed. I expect soldiers like your ways."

"My ways are different," he said. "If you're an officer, you've got to lead. I look harder than I am."

"You don't look hard, Andrew. Even without your beard you don't."

His hands were in his pockets and his head downcast.

"You and I," he began, "you and I, Margery, have always been jolly sensible."

"Have we?"

Involuntarily she moved, and his gaze fell upon a little, mean flower she had thought was concealed. It was a flower for which, when hidden in the seed, he had suffered much. After experiment, however, the crop was destroyed, and Andrew did not know that it existed still in England. Now he stared and forgot everything but the little, dirt-coloured poppy that was thriving here and flaunting its ugliness happily. It took him back to the discovery of the capsules, the belief that he had found a very great treasure, his struggle to keep the seed while universal loss and disaster overtook the rest of his expedition, and the memory that for three days and nights the worthless seed-pods had never left his hand.

"Good Lord, Margery, my poppy!" he murmured.

The murder was out, and the little gardener trembled. She had to choose between tears and some other expression of emotion. Indifference before his discovery was impossible. She tried to laugh and failed. To pretend she did not know the poppy was there would be vain. For some

moments she kept silence, and that was the best thing she could do; for it gave Andrew time to get over his astonishment and weigh, in the uncertain balance of his mind, the significance of this discovery. While she half turned her back, he examined his futile flower and saw that only love had set it there.

“That!” he said.

Margery grew very pale. She did not know what to answer. There existed no possible excuse but the right one.

“I — I value it,” she told him, and bent to tend something else. For a while he did not speak, but his mind moved swiftly enough and his dark eyes grew bright. Here surely, if ever, was certainty. The thing thrust out and forgotten had become the headstone of Margery’s corner. Why had she treasured a flower worthless every way, but for the reason that made it precious to her heart? A thousand assurances from other people had not carried half the weight of this blossom now looking up at the man and reminding him of a bitter past. Yet how much more it told of the present! Only a fool could misinterpret this, and Andrew was no fool.

“You little wonder!” he said. “That tells me what I’ve been wanting to know for many a day.”

“It’s — it’s interesting, Andrew. I kept it ——”

“I know why you kept it, and I’ll ask you to go on keeping it. I hated it till now. And now I’d go through fire and water for the wretched weed. Come indoors a minute.”

She followed him, and they stood under the picture of Mr. Mushet’s wolves.

“Margery,” he said, “I’m going to France next week.” She nodded.

“Will you marry me when I come back?”

She felt faint, and put out her arms helplessly; but when she found herself in his, she recovered.

“I love you, Margery, and have loved you these hun-

dred years. Only — only for fairness I couldn't fix it up. Everything went wrong and it didn't seem sporting, and — but, after all, it was for you to say 'yes,' or 'no.' I've had it in my mind to give you the chance a thousand times; but what had I to offer? And what have I to offer now for that matter but myself?"

"And what more on earth did you think I wanted?" she asked. "You're everything to me and have been ever since I was old enough to love you."

"Thank God then — and God forgive me for holding off."

He blamed himself, with reason enough, for a morbid sensitiveness that had made them both unhappy; but she would not suffer him to do so. She was soon joyous and lifted him to joy.

"I hate to go out of your sight now," he said. "Can I come in and see your uncle to-night? I'm fearing he won't take this very well."

"You needn't fear that."

"May I come to supper?"

"Will you? How heavenly of you, Andrew!"

He saw her to the entrance gate of "Colneside" presently; and if Margery's typewriting called for a gentle remonstrance from Mr. Ambrose when the letters came before him, there was a reason for it.

Gregory Mushet heard the news in the dinner hour and accepted the inevitable with secret restrictions. He said nothing at the time, however, and expressed pleasure, but not surprise.

"The silly man's found his tongue at last, then. I suppose he couldn't well go to France without. But I'll have no marriage before he goes, Margery."

"He never suggested it, Uncle Greg; and may he come in to supper? He won't be calm in his mind till he knows your view."

"He heard my view before he went for a soldier. I like the man, and always bow to superior education, as you

know. I'm not saying it's a lift up for such a girl as you; but for the family it is, and my brother, Samuel, would be the first to grant it, and so would your mother, if she was alive. As for the rest, we must be hopeful. He's had such a proper bellyful of bad luck, that on the law of average, which even this war can't change, he ought to run up against a streak of good fortune."

"So he cught then, you clever dear," said Margery, thankful for this sanguinary prophecy.

"And given good fortune," continued Mr. Mushet, "it don't want a particularly keen outlook to see him uplifted. We mustn't run on too far, and, whatever happens, you don't run out of 'Fair View Villa'—I warn you of that; but a man like Hempson may rise in the army till he's a power and a very exalted character. And if it overtakes him, there must be no turning his back on his wife's relations, or nothing of that."

"Could he? If he was a general, could he?"

"He don't, whether he could or not. And he can come to supper and welcome."

At the supper-party all went well. Mr. Mushet admired and respected Andrew. He also regarded him as a social superior. For Gregory had a conservative mind, and, while vain enough in some ways, made no pretence of education or importance. After supper he talked a good deal, and finding that Andrew had no future plans, indicated his own wishes.

"It's to your credit you don't want to marry her before you go," said Gregory. "She'd agree to anything, the silly maid; but no. All in good time, Mr. Hempson——"

"Call me Andrew, Mr. Mushet."

"I was waiting for you to ask and I'm willing, and it must be 'Uncle Gregory' for you; because, as I told Madge this morning, you needn't think to take her away from her relations. That we wouldn't suffer."

"I should hope not."

"And that stands, mind you, wherever you rise to. As

for her, she's a very praiseworthy girl. I say it to your face, Margery. Speaking generally, every man at the bottom of his heart would sooner marry a Mary than a Martha. They're wrong, of course, but it's the weakness of the average male to put peace before anything, and the Marthas never get the credit that's due to them in the home. Their fine results are took for granted, and all the needful fuss and splutter that go to the results are brought against the poor women, as if you could have anything worth having in this world without a bit of fuss and splutter. But Madge is something betwixt and between: she's got the virtues of both and the faults of neither. When I say she rises to this house, I've said all that needs to be said. A Mary would be a proper catastrophe to this house, and a Martha would get over-anxious and be a proper catastrophe to me; but I've trained up Madge to steer a middle course, so to speak. In fact, being what she is, and having to thank me largely for what she is, it wouldn't be fair to take her away."

"I wouldn't go — I couldn't," vowed Margery.

"After the war will be time enough to plan the future," declared Andrew.

"No," answered Mr. Mushet. "I'm not one of the 'wait and see' sort myself. Take my house. Would it look like it does, and be what it is, if I'd waited to see? No, Andrew, you must live with me after the war if you want to live with her. Because Madge is everything I've got in the human line and I mustn't be deprived. She may be your wife, but that's no reason why she should give up being my niece."

"Or going on with my work at 'Colneside' either," said Margery.

The programme by no means chimed with Andrew Hempson's future intentions; but he felt this an unfitting day for argument.

"So be it then," he said. "My only thought is for her

happiness, and I know very well she wouldn't be happy far away from you."

This granted, Gregory was generous.

"Thank you for that word," he answered. "It would be a great load on my mind if you hadn't spoken it. Of course it's a great lift up for Madge, marrying you; because you stand higher than her on the spindle side, and spear side too, and when I say you mustn't come between her and her relations, I don't mean you marry her relations. We're a proud people."

"I judge every man by himself, Mr. Mushet, and I judge myself not worthy to tie Margery's shoe-string."

"That's a figure of speech you'll get over. And if glory comes your way, you must rise to it. And I can promise you she will do the same. And this is your home after you marry. That's understood. And I shan't be unworthy of you, no matter what happens, because, in my steadfast way, I'm a credit to the country. If you came home with a V.C. to-morrow week, this house would still be this house and well equal to you."

Andrew admitted all these truths. Then he departed with Margery to his mother, and the mere fact of missing Margery during the hour before bedtime, when she was accustomed to sit and listen to him and bring him his "night-cap," convinced Mr. Mushet how wise he had been to make such drastic conditions. He was well aware that they were most unusual. "To strike while the iron was hot was the only thing to do," he thought. "If I'd waited till they'd got used to the change and had time to plan their future, it would have been too late and they'd have resisted me. Now they can't."

CHAPTER XXI

THE PROBLEM OF THE PICTURE

MARRIAGE did not cloud the vision that Aveline and Peter had enjoyed of each other; no shadow dimmed the horizon of their united days, save the supreme shadow that threatened all. Then, from outside, intruded trivial incidents that puzzled Peter, for it seemed not easy to understand why he and his wife should feel so differently to trifles. Upon the subject of the first problem they heartily agreed. They were asked to do something that both disliked, but it happened that she who asked the favour might justly hope to see it granted. It was not easy to refuse her, and while Aveline held out the longer, she reluctantly agreed at last. Upon the question of the second problem, however, they saw with different eyes.

The first petition had to do with a photograph; while the second was not a favour begged, but a commission offered.

Nelly Chaffe continued her drawing lessons with Mrs. Mistley, and while making no progress whatever, so much enjoyed the society of her new friend, now out of doors and now in the tiny studio at Aveline's new home, that she persisted in wasting certain hours weekly, though her mistress assured her it was nonsense to continue.

"You'd be far better employed cutting those cabbages, or digging them up, or planting fresh ones, than trying to paint them," she said on an occasion of open-air sketching.

But Nelly persisted, and declared that her pleasantest hours were those spent in the drawing lessons.

Then came a day when Helena called at the studio of her

protégée's new home to drive Nelly back to Mersea, when her task was done. Tea awaited her, and she was full of admiration for the photograph already mentioned. It had been taken at her wish — nay her command, and represented Peter Mistley and his bride.

And now Helena drank tea and talked and praised the photograph.

"It's just caught that particular loveliness you had in church on your wedding day," she said. "It's heavenly, even without the colour, and I've just taken it to the photographer — why, d'you think? To have an enlargement, half life-size, for my own little sacred room — my boudoir. Then I shall feel you're there. I don't want your Peter in my boudoir, however. You'll still sit beside him in a silver frame in the drawing-room; but in my own sacred room you'll be all alone — just your lovely self."

Helena was going to be photographed.

"They want me for an illustrated paper in connection with my Red Cross work. My first instinct was to refuse; but Parkyn seemed pleased, and he reminded me that I hadn't been taken for a year; so it's to happen next Monday at twelve o'clock. And now for my greatest piece of news: I've got a commission for you."

"How much too good you are to me always, always, Helena," cried Aveline.

"It's nothing — quite tiny, hardly worth mentioning; but it will go into the world and be seen by thousands of people, that's the advantage of it. In fact, Parkyn has decided on a coloured picture for the herbaceous catalogue — the Michaelmas daisies; and I've got him to let you do it."

The artist remained silent and her animation died away. She was reflecting, and wholly unconscious of the expression on her face.

"You're not pleased," said Helena.

Aveline came to herself.

"Don't think that. I'd love to do it. There's so little

I can do for such kind friends. But — but — he couldn't possibly like what I should do — in fact my work doesn't appeal to him."

"He's getting most understanding about pictures — far more so than you imagine. The Michaelmas daisies, when they're all out together — an acre of them — are a joy, and just a thing you'll do to perfection."

"I should disappoint him horribly — and perhaps you, too. I'm an absolute duffer at flowers."

"You're not, Aveline!" cried Nelly, and she went to a portfolio, before the other could prevent her, and produced the drawing of Emma Darcy and the torch lilies.

It was one of the painter's successes. Before a flaming background of scarlet and orange flowers, spiring aloft above a green tangle of their foliage, appeared Emma looking out upon the spectator. The likeness was happy and a little flattered. Emma's ruined beauty had not wholly vanished, and there was pathos in the picture, though in her hand the vagrant held her pipe.

Mrs. Ambrose, who had not seen the work, was considerably moved by contemplation of it. Her lips fell apart and she stared with genuine interest. For a moment she ceased to be the histrionic Helena.

"Good Lord! How like!" she said. "Poor wretch: her life might have been so different. It's horribly sad, though. Take it away, Nelly. You've given me the creeps."

"I wasn't going to show it to you," said Aveline.

"I forgot," said Miss Chaffe. "Forgive me, Helena."

Their solicitation pleased Mrs. Ambrose.

"You girls can't possibly know what this unfortunate affair means to a proud woman," she said. "It is the skeleton in my husband's cupboard — an everlasting outrage, so to say."

"It won't be everlasting," said Aveline. "Poor William is killing himself as fast as he can."

"Really, one can't be very sorry since he refuses every

rational offer. He'd have to confess, if he told the truth, that I have been kind and generous — as much so as I dared. But it's a great disgrace, and Parkyn is wonderfully patient and long-suffering. Don't talk about it — never talk about it. Nobody can do anything, I'm afraid."

"He's so clever by nature," said Aveline, thankful that the subject had drifted away from the Michaelmas daisies. "I've had a long talk with him once or twice, and he's well worth listening to when he's sober."

"Parkyn says he was a wonderful boy; but always insurgent and impossible. Great natural gifts poisoned by an obstinate will and a hatred of all those beautiful principles that make civilised society what it is."

"If he'd only had ambition."

"He never had — except the ambition to be unlike everybody else. He broke his mother's heart, yet he always puts primroses on her grave once a year."

"He's a very kindly man really," said Aveline.

"I hope he is," answered Helena — "for Emma's sake," she added.

"He thinks the world of Emma, and she, the world of him."

This grave matter subdued Mrs. Ambrose entirely and made her forget her friend's commission. Aveline was glad that the subject did not arise again during her visit and believed, when Nelly and the elder had departed, that Helena understood she did not wish to paint the picture.

But, unfortunately for her, the commission was not done with, for Peter had also heard the news from Mr. Ambrose himself at "Colneside," and when he came home, told her that he brought a surprise. Mr. Ambrose had mentioned the proposed picture to him and Peter was mildly pleased.

"It might mean the beginning of some useful and regular work," he said. "Of course, it's child's play to you."

He dwelt on the value of the advertisement, and Aveline found it quite impossible to give any adequate reason why

she should decline the work. Decline she did, however, much to her husband's astonishment.

"Out of the question," she said. "Couldn't do it his way and he wouldn't take it if I did it in mine."

"Of course, do it your way — that's the point. Your way would arrest and challenge. If it is done in the old, conventional style, like every other coloured catalogue, nobody would look at it twice."

"I don't feel like it. I'm rather tired of painting flowers: it spoils you for more important things."

"Well, you'll change your mind when you see the Michaelmas daisies," he said; but she did not wish to leave the matter doubtful, or have the commission hanging over her. She tried another argument.

"I'm sorry, in a way, you don't feel like I do, Peter," she said.

"What objection can you have, my precious girl?"

"Well," she said. "Isn't it playing it rather low down? I mean to illustrate gardeners' catalogues. Of course, I may never do any good, but now we're married and I can live, I should like in my small way to aim just as high as you do."

"Well, you are. You're going to send some pictures to London, and I'm sure the autumn shows will hang them. And in these days, when people aren't buying pictures, you may be certain that artists don't mind painting for reproduction. You'll do an interesting thing, and thousands of people will see it. You don't value your luck, my lovely girl."

She knew all this without his telling her, and secretly blamed herself for advancing so feeble an excuse.

"Yes, of course, that's true," she admitted; "but somehow I turn against it. I can't tell you why; but I do."

"Well, I wish it, Aveline."

"I know you do, and if anything could make me want to paint them, it would be that. Don't talk about it any more, my dearest — not for the present."

Peter, of course, dropped the commission, and for the rest of that day neither again alluded to it. At breakfast next morning, however, he touched the subject at an angle, but in such a manner as to leave her free to speak of it or not as she pleased.

She ignored it.

Thus it happened. He asked if she could give him an hour after noon and she gladly agreed.

"I want you in the herbaceous garden," he said. "I've got a big white scheme and the whites are easy; but I should like you to see what's doing and tell me the colours to go with it. So do come. We haven't had a prowling 'Colneside' for ages."

"Of course I'll come."

"I used to love flowers for themselves," he said tenderly. "Now I love them for you. Everything beautiful and precious that makes me long, or makes me content, or feel glad one way or another — everything worth while means you."

She rose, put her arms round him and kissed him.

"It's too much — it's too great — a thousand times too great — all you feel for me. The least flower is more beautiful and precious than I am. There are millions of things more beautiful and precious in the world than the most beautiful, precious woman who ever was born."

"Bar one. And then we'll stroll over and see the gladiolus and Michaelmas daisies. This sun will fetch them along. There's a dream of beauty waiting for you — the purple gladiolus and the hybrids of *Primulinus*, that lemon-coloured, hooded species from America. They are like flames of clear fire. 'Tired of flower painting!' Wait till you have a great sheaf of those in one of your big terra-cotta jars, or that sea-green, Morocco glass Miss Chaffe gave you."

She did not answer, but showed by a contraction of her eyes and a momentary hardening of her lips that he pained her, and that she understood the allusion.

She asked him if he would have some more coffee, and he shook his head.

“It goes well, as far as we duffers at home can judge from newspapers — the war, I mean,” he said.

“I hope so indeed. I’ll be in the herbaceous garden at half-past twelve.”

He went to his work, and when he had gone, Aveline gave way to misery. Indeed, she wept a little. Then, impatient with herself, she went to her studio and put some finishing touches to Emma and the torch lilies. Work cheered her, and at midday she set off cheerfully enough to the gardens.

CHAPTER XXII

A FLOWER PIECE

THE scene was silvery, shot to brightness where the sun turned beyond the zenith, and the rows of Lombardy poplars at water's edge below "Colneside" held bravely to their fading green. In widening perspective to the beholder stretched the great herbaceous wealth of the nursery, still full of colour splendours; and here Aveline met Peter beneath a walnut tree.

They started into the maze of flower-light, its masses disposed in parallel lines due north and south.

Far off, towards Colchester and Colne, the gardens misted into little clouds of brightness set under the trees, but as they approached, the colours gained in brilliance and grew distinct in masses of azure and scarlet, purple and orange, and creamy white. Beside them shone amethystyne globe thistles and spread a patch of tall speedwells, blue as southern seas. Then crimson pentstemons massed against a bed of sparkling golden coreopsis and these were followed by Grecian violets, in a sheet of velvet, spangled with butterflies and murmuring with bees. Next opened a drift of lavenders and white spiderworts, flax of bright king's yellow, and another speedwell, that lifted tender, sky-blue wands three feet high above its grey foliage. Seen closely its tiny amber anthers gave each blossom a note of distinction; and, indeed, every flower of these gay legions revealed wonders and subtle personal charms unshared by any other growing thing. Each, while lost in the blaze, enjoyed its own personal beauty. They were as an artist's painting, wherein the wide passages of colour sweetly laid are seen at a glance, yet at closer study reveal

for the connoisseur many a magic and delicate delight to reward intimate search. Thus the giant sea lavenders displayed one reigning hue of a pale opal — milky and shot with colour; but examined, the tone resolved into unnumbered points of mingled pink and pure white, where the sterile and fertile blossoms hung closely together over the intricate pattern of the stems. Nor was this all to note, for while the greater blossoms in each mass were pure pink, each of the lesser white stars held a drop of purple in the heart of its tiny cup. Of all these mingled hues was the great picture painted, and full fifty million separate buds had broken to create the whole.

A sky-blue scabious with ragged petals swayed joyfully beside these great sea lavenders. Then came spaces whence the flowers had fled, and stretched many plats of resting green. Elsewhere a plant or two, or a group of plants offered little mosaics in the greater pattern of the whole.

Aveline helped Peter with his choice, and finding her happy again, he was about to suggest a visit to the Michaelmas daisies, when Parkyn Ambrose himself suddenly appeared. He walked through the gardens on his way to the office.

“My wife is helping me with the white garden for Shropshire,” said Peter.

“And I hope soon to hear that she will be busy with the star asters. Bultitude tells me they will be in perfection next week. I am glad to have met you, Mrs. Mistle, because I can indicate a little what I want. My purpose is an attractive colour scheme to indicate to the public how beautiful these asters are in the mass. Those who visit them understand and realise that only seen in abundance can we appreciate their full splendour and possibilities. Thus we create a laudable inclination to purchase ten plants instead of one. And I want you not to be content with a mere beautiful arrangement of colour — which you may get in a wall paper or a carpet — but to paint the

asters, and show they are asters so completely that an expert would be able to name the sorts."

To Peter's astonishment Aveline quietly nodded and made no declaration of refusal.

"I feel sure your skill will enable you to do what I want, and yet produce a work of excellent art. Don't you think so?" asked the great nurseryman.

It appeared that Aveline did. Her husband could hardly believe his ears.

"I quite understand what you want, Mr. Ambrose," she said, "and if I can do it, I will do it. I'll paint the flowers as gardening people see them."

He beamed.

"Do, and then you will make a very beautiful picture. The more closely your painting resembles them, the better painting will it be."

When he was gone, Peter waited for Aveline to speak, but she did not, so he felt called upon to do so.

"Wonders never cease," he said. "What on earth did Ambrose say to make you change your mind?"

"I'd decided already," she declared. "I was going to tell you. I really don't know, looking back, why I made any fuss. And I dare say the result will be something better than I've ever done before."

"What a humbug you are!"

She did not answer for a moment; then she admitted it.

"Yes — colossal."

"Come and see the gladiolus field. There are a hundred gorgeous, new Americans just out. I'll leave you there."

They started; but they did not reach their destination, for Gregory Mushet was at work in the way, and from him Aveline heard the news of Margery's engagement.

"Then I can't go to the gladiolus field, or anywhere else till I've seen her," said Aveline.

She hastened off with Peter, and when he went to the studio she sought Margery in the office.

CHAPTER XXIII

ON PEEWIT ISLAND

THOMAS DARCY was called upon to endure another visitation from his sister and the errant William. They descended upon him during a wet night, and shattered the peace of his bachelor abode once more.

But on this epiphany of the usual bedraggled pair, Thomas had the surprise of his life; for while they shared his supper, Emma related a strange thing.

"Billy's going to do a bit of work," she said. "It's come over him that a bit of healthy work would set him up before the winter."

"Goodstruth! Him work?"

"I'm going to touch it," confessed William, "not because it is work, but because it's a change; and if I can harden up a bit before winter it will be a good thing for me."

"I wanted him to have his hair cut and go looking tidy," said Emma. "But he won't do that."

"Go where?" asked Darcy. "You don't tell me he's got work for the asking? The war haven't brought us to him yet?"

"I'm going culling and cleaning and packing oysters for the Company," explained William. "I'm a freeman of Brittlesea, and they're terrible short of hands, as you know, Thomas, and, in a word, the under manager says I may go to the work. It's not new work to me for that matter."

"We all know that; and we know what happened last time you took a hand."

"The oysters would get into my food basket," admitted

William. "The wickedness of enemies, no doubt. But that was three years ago."

"Twice you were warned, and you'll be a freeman no more if it happens again."

"The under manager's new since then," explained Emma, "and he didn't know about the past."

"I go purely for health," explained William. "And if it suits me, I shall continue in uprightness; and if not, I shan't. I offered at the will of God, and the under manager, knowing me not, took me. So on Monday next I shall be at the Hard with the rest, half after five o'clock. As to oysters, for the first offence they caution you, for the second they rub it in, and for the third you lose the right to be a freeman. I stopped at the second; but that's all buried in the past, and I shall consider I've got my three lives again."

"Don't," said Emma. "You're very well known, and nobody will have a kind word for you if you're caughted out with oysters."

"Cleaning oysters is hard work, as I well remember," continued William, "but there's fine air in Peewit Island and the saltings suit me."

"I wish I could go," said Emma; "but they wouldn't suffer women to do it."

"They may come to it," replied her brother. "'They'll be wanting women on the land all through Essex next spring, if not sooner. A time's coming when you could make twenty shillings a week without a doubt, Emma."

"Oo!" cried she. "Where, Tom?"

"You dare!" said Billy. "You dare seek work and I'll turn the house out of windows. Hell! The people will be saying we're a worthy, hard-working couple and ought to be encouraged."

Three days later Billy started to work, and stood with a crowd of others on Brightlingsea Hard in a grey October dawn. They chaffed him, and a few resented his presence,

but William's tongue was more than a match for most of the freemen. A varied company set forth in the boats. Some were working, long-shore folk; some, aged veterans of fourscore; some, smart middle-aged mariners, prosperous and well-to-do. These lent a hand in the business of culling and packing for the fishery from no necessity to earn money, but in their capacity of freemen of the port, all interested in the Colne Fishery.

The open boats were made fast to the *Peewit*, which waited for them with steam up. Then she started for the packing shed in Pyefleet Creek.

The crew of the *Peewit* marked William Ambrose and discussed him.

Darcy was asked what it meant, and he told the skipper all that he knew. Mr. Rebow protested.

"Surely once bit twice shy," he said. "Don't they remember what happened last time the rip had a job culling?"

"What does he know about culling, anyway?" asked Samuel Mushet from the engine-room door. "It's skilled work, and a good culler's born, not made. Uneven culls is the plague of the fish shops."

"Old Tell-yer-fer-why" laughed.

"He can cull, Samuel! When he was caught out three years ago, only the first-class natives were found in his basket."

"They'll set him at cleaning, I expect," said Tom Darcy; and he was right, for when the boats came alongside *Peewit* Island and the workers tumbled ashore, Billy was put to work at the business of scraping and chopping from the oysters the growths of sessile barnacle, seaweed, spawn, "pock," and husk of tingles' eggs that encrusted them.

The packing sheds were transformed from the gay day of the "Opening." The flags and the tables were gone. Now mounds of oysters and piles of barrels filled the sheds. In the outer chamber, on raised stages running

round it, men sat or knelt in rows before and behind the banks of shells, cleaning and culling; while within, the packing proceeded, and barrel after barrel, sack after sack, was filled and fastened for market. The *Peewit* presently took a cargo and returned to Brightlingsea. Then she picked up a trawling ketch or two working over the creek, and brought their catches to the packing house.

The workers hammered away and cleansed the shells, while the oysters were then graded, or culled, to their different sizes. From the mounds before them trained and quick-eyed men sorted first the "royals," and then, from dwindling piles, selected the "seconds" and the "thirds." In each mass also occurred a small proportion of "cripples," or "roughs"—good oysters, but malformed, or broken-heeled in course of their growth. Such do not tempt the fishmonger, but are sold cheaply to the workers, or used for sauce.

Here arose a babel of sounds—the eternal chink of the cultack, the slither of the shells in the sorters' hands, the hammering of the coopers, fitting hoops or heads to the oyster barrels, and the dull thunder of the packers, who continually banged their barrels on the hollow floor to settle the oysters within them. The skilled packers get their ware into remarkably small space, and a barrel of six or seven hundred "royals" was but a little affair. Gruff voices and slow laughter ran through the medley of sound, and through the sheds permeated a reek and salty smell of weed and brine. Overhead, wooden mallets echoed in an upper chamber, where carpenters worked. Under the rafters stretched a great room, like a sail loft, and within it thousands of barrels waited the needs of the packers. Every sort of barrel was there, from the little toy that would hold fifty oysters, to the receptacle for a thousand; from pail-shaped Belgian "kits" to American iron-hooped barrels, that told the tale of the war. For they had come to England full of horseshoes,

and that duty done, were now secured by the fisheries for another freight.

William worked for an hour or two, then he cut his thumb with a barnacle and stopped. Presently he proceeded again until the dinner hour, when he ate and drank and smoked with the rest. Emma had stored his basket with ample food; but he gave most of it to others, and was contented with his pipe and a full bottle.

The day passed and anon full barrels, large and small, were rowed to the *Peewit*. Then the sheds were washed down and flooded with sea water, and the oysters that remained were piled into net baskets and dropped in the pits until next day. Soon the steamer went south with her cargo piled aboard and the workers in the boats astern. On the island remained only a member of the river police, his black figure standing stark in the fading light.

The saltings had grown sere and grey now, and their flowers were dead; but flashes and streaks of colour persisted, for the glassworts were crimson and purple. No sunshine had broken through that still, grey day.

Some men chaffed William and asked him how he liked the feel of work; but he was very silent, and created, as he well knew how to do on occasion, a gulf between himself and lesser minds. He smoked and remained abstracted until the landing; then he came ashore, entered the nearest inn and stopped there, until Emma, guessing his place, entered and took him home.

She was anxious to learn what he had made of it.

"What I didn't make of it was 'duty,'" said William. "I told the chaps they mustn't for a moment fancy I was there to do my duty, or any infernal trash like that. I said 'the man who does his duty is no friend of mine.' Then I cut my hand on a damned barnacle; and if it gathers and I get blood poisoning and die, you ought to have a pension."

"It won't," said Emma; "it's nothing at all."

“You never know. My blood’s half whisky. Wonderful oysters this year. A week of it will do me good. But a week’s likely to be enough.”

Thomas Darcy from the *Peewit* overtook them.

“Well, and how did you get on, William?” he asked.

“A blameless life, Tom. There’s not much to choose between the oysters and the Brittlesea freemen that I can see. Poor fellows — the freemen, I mean. To see them so busy and so cheerful and so content in their humble, messy calling: it very near brings tears to the eyes.”

“That’s funny,” answered Darcy, “for a few of the better chaps spoke to me not ten minutes ago, and they said that to see the brother of Parkyn Ambrose sitting there cleaning oyster shells, and broke down in clothes and mind and body, very near brought tears to their eyes, too.”

“They know not what they say. I tell you, Thomas, that oysters are wiser far than men; for they never quarrel, nor war upon each other, nor fill their world with blood and tears, nor envy their neighbours’ landmark, nor make a hell of the decent place in which they live. ’Twas no God, Thomas, but a cunning devil that let life rise to conscious existence and cover itself with shame for evermore.”

That night William Ambrose, after being turned out of the “King’s Head” at closing time, succeeded in becoming very drunk elsewhere, and next morning he was not on the Hard when the freemen of Brightlingsea set out to their labours.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE STAR ASTERS

HELENA AMBROSE and Geoffrey Seabrook belonged to that race of spirits who let love throw no dust in their eyes, but preserve a long view and order their transports with circumspection. Not for them would the world ever be well lost. Their passion was perfectly genuine, and they believed it would never perish; but that it might be the more permanent, they made it a matter of business.

"We needn't ruin our lives because we love each other," Helena had said at an early stage of the romance, and Seabrook felt the profoundest respect for that sentiment.

"On the contrary," he answered; "we must build upon the present foundations. Misery and ostracism wouldn't alter what we feel for each other; but I don't mean the woman I adore to be miserable and ostracised, and I certainly don't wish to be myself. We've had the enormous luck to meet each other, and there are no complications but the accident of you being married to a very sensible sort of man."

So things stood, and they decided that they were not sordid, but merely practical. Moreover, from the man's point of view the secrecy and intrigue added much to the salt of the situation, and though such things did not appeal with the same force to Helena, she recognised the need. But now a complication little anticipated began to threaten the draughtsman. Conscription was in the air, and the single man would soon be directed to attest.

Geoffrey had seen a little of Helena recently, for she arranged a concert for the Belgian Refugees, this time on

Mersea Island, and he had spent the night at the Manor House. The occasion had offered opportunity of some talk on the subject of exemption.

"I should like to advance a claim," declared Mr. Ambrose, "but I will be frank with you. Mistle is, of course, my senior artist, and, as you know, is married."

"But he married before August, so he's single — just as single as Mr. Seabrook," argued Helena, who was present at the conversation.

Then Seabrook spoke.

"I'm a patriot, as Mr. Ambrose knows. Our country wants us and we must go — if we can."

The elder nodded.

"I should be the last to question your determination. You do not need to be told that I have reflected deeply on the subject. My business belongs emphatically to the times of peace, and while a certain considerable body of men must still be employed upon it, for the sake of the perishable commodity in which I deal, the issue of designing and laying out new gardens may undoubtedly be admitted a minor matter for the present. Were you, or Mistle, infirm of health, or physically prevented from taking your place in the ranks, I should be very thankful to retain your services if it could be done."

"That's my only fear," confessed Seabrook, who had already discussed the matter very fully with Mrs. Ambrose. "I'm not strong — not robust, that is — and my heart is not very good; but it would be a terrible sorrow to me, as things are now, if I was prevented from going. And even if I couldn't fight, I should feel I ought to be helping the great cause in some other way."

Parkyn was interested.

"I did not know you had a physical weakness. But since that is the case, it might be possible, perhaps, to advance a reasonable claim."

"I would do anything on earth for you, sir, and make any personal sacrifice in my power. You are a very

great deal more to me than a master and, if I may say so, I have always felt pride in knowing you were my friend. Loyalty would make me submit to anything that you wished. I hope I may be able to serve; but if I cannot, I shall place myself in your hands."

"You can't do anything wiser than that, Mr. Seabrook," said Helena.

"You have registered?" asked Ambrose.

"Oh, yes — immediately."

The elder considered.

"We can leave it at that for the moment and wait to learn what steps the Government will take."

The subject was changed, and presently Geoffrey went off to the village schoolroom to sing. Mr. Ambrose did not attend the concert, and his wife had further opportunities of speech with the musician.

It was true he had a weak heart, and a personal friend in Colchester — a young physician — had testified to the fact; but the weakness could not be described as serious, and was hardly of a nature to preclude service.

"You were wonderful with Parkyn: you exuded patriotism," said Helena.

He laughed.

"It's a bore to have to humbug him. Can you well imagine anything more futile than myself in khaki — even for home service? I loathe and hate the whole business. To herd with soldiers, to be driven about like a beast and forced into this disgusting machine, as a Chicago pig is forced into the engine and turned into mincemeat. It's all so unclean and unseemly. But that's war. That's what diplomacy, secret diplomacy, has planned for myriads of decent, self-respecting, useful chaps — geniuses included. That's the best that conscious intelligence can do in the way of portioning out the earth between the nations of the earth. You can only settle it by killing off the men of the hungry nations. And the nation that kills most, wins. Which means the weakest

go down. And the hosts turned to dust are called 'heroes.' That's how the masses of mankind are content to let their cursed Governments rule them. And then we bleat about 'freedom' and 'liberty,' and all the rest of the idiotic names for things that don't exist and never have existed."

"You shan't go," she said. "I'll give up everything — all our plans and all our patience and everything. I should die if you went. In any case I should give the show away if you went. I know I should."

"We must keep our nerve. If I hadn't got you, I shouldn't care a button, for I should have nothing to lose but my life, and that's nothing without you. But having you, I naturally want to live. I can delay and postpone and put off as long as it's decently possible. And the longer I keep out of it, the less chance there is of getting shot."

"Some have died in four months from the day they put on khaki," she said.

"My heart might really get queer if I had to go on route marches and all that foolery. So we've every reason to be hopeful," he answered. "It's amusing to feel you're going to be hunted. I've got a brain that ought to be rather great in a thing like this. I'm not up against a man — only a machine; and if I can't get the better of a machine, I must be a bigger fool than I think I am."

"You don't want to go?"

"Good Lord, no! Nobody who isn't weak in his head could possibly want to go."

"One talks about the glory of war, and khaki being the only wear for men and so on," she said; "but when you're faced suddenly with a hideous possibility like this ——"

He laughed again.

"Ideals are like our best clothes. We trot them out to please and impress other people; and when the other people are gone, we put them away again. They don't

influence our working life; they're only decoration and frills. Our real ideals we don't wear outside. If you're a sane man in an insane world, you keep your true opinions to yourself."

Helena met Geoffrey again only three days later upon a question she considered to be urgent. She directed him to be in the gardens at noon at a certain place, where she would also be. Very rarely they permitted themselves one of these apparently accidental meetings. It was a practice held in reserve for exceptional occasions, and when Seabrook got her note, he wondered a little what it might mean.

They met by the plantations of flowering shrubs, now plunged in autumn sobriety, and she soon enlightened him.

"I'm afraid that there may be danger," she said. "Nothing comes single-handed. I met 'Marmalade Emma' two days ago and was nice to her and gave her a sovereign. William has been working — at least he worked for one day, and now he's ill again. And he wants to see you. Emma was on Mersea Island lying in wait to tell me so. I asked why, and said I didn't know William knew you, and so on. But she reminded me of — our picnic. In fact, life seems full of anxiety. If he's really ill, he may get desperate and do something objectionable."

"Don't feel in the least perturbed. If he were responsible, it would be another matter, but he isn't. I'll see him, however. But not deliberately, and not in response to that woman's message. I can work it differently, and I know how. I can make the man a friend as easily as possible, and the woman too."

"Emma's all right, but William's so utterly unexpected, always. However, you've taken a weight off my mind," she said. "I haven't slept for two nights."

He mourned this fact and thought her looking pale.

"I'll take an early opportunity. It's quite easy.

They've got a den at Brightlingsea, haven't they? Margery Mushet was telling me about them."

"Yes, they're there."

"I shall hear that William Ambrose is ill and visit him — from you, for charity. Probably he'll have forgotten all about the past. A drunkard has a short memory."

Helena took comfort.

"You heavenly thing! You've quite set my mind at peace. I'm here to see somebody else — not you, of course. Where are the Michaelmas daisies? I promised Aveline to meet her at the Michaelmas daisies and take her off to luncheon."

"I'll show you where Mrs. Mistley's at work. Say you're happy again?"

"Yes, I am — as happy as I ever shall be till the matter of your joining the colours is cleared up."

They traversed the nurseries and presently found Aveline seated before great drifts of the star asters.

The gardens were flashing their final fires, and on this pure day of October, Colchester misted brightly above the poplars and an azure vapour hung low on Colne. Summer passed slowly from the flowers. In masses of clean, sparkling colour shone the Michaelmas daisies of Aveline's drawing. They made a gladness in the sunshine and a joy for the eye to rest upon. Bold, harmonious contrasts marked the banks and billows of them. Their colours indeed rolled like waves and merged into each other. Here were rich violets and cool greys, golden-eyed mauves and nodding crests of feathery white. The magic children of the heart-leaved aster seemed to queen it over the sturdier species for perfection of graceful form and lustrous hue. They spread in great sheets of flashing light, whereon butterflies opened and shut their scarlet and ebony wings.

Helena found Aveline, bade Mr. Seabrook good-bye, and fell to talking. The picture, now far advanced, quite filled her with dismay.

“But — but ——” she said, staring at a pre-Raphaelite production, wherein every star of the foreground flowers was meticulously rayed — “but, my dear child, what on earth are you doing? Your own way was the right and proper and only way to paint this and — good gracious, Aveline — how horrid!”

“Isn’t it? And you can’t think how difficult, too. What did Whistler say once — about Brett’s mussels and limpets, I think? — ‘Quite wrong, but how the devil does he do it?’ And when they’re brought down to the right size for the catalogue cover, they will just look exactly like every other catalogue cover, and all will be well.”

“This is very naughty,” declared Helena. “I’m ashamed of you, Aveline. And now Parkyn will crow over me and give you other pictures to paint. I’ve a good mind not to take you to lunch.”

“You promised,” said Aveline; “and I’ll paint the asters again — for you, when I’ve finished this fearful and wonderful thing.”

“You’ll never put your name to this?”

“My name? Oh dear, yes, if he likes. What’s in a name?” answered the painter.

CHAPTER XXV

THE INSPIRATION

GEOFFREY SEABROOK let it be known that he was going down to Brightlingsea to get a breath of salt air and watch the Engineers pontooning.

But he asked for the holiday. Though free to go and come without restriction, he never lost an opportunity to be correct. When Parkyn Ambrose came into the studio, therefore, Geoffrey suggested a whole holiday, since nothing official stood in the way; and Mr. Ambrose made no objection.

"By all means," he said. "I'm bound to say it is a long time since you relaxed. I entertain a guest at no distant date," continued Ambrose. "And I shall take occasion to bring him acquainted with Mr. Mistley and you. He will spend much of his time in the gardens, and the studio will interest him a great deal. I refer to Mr. Mortimer, of Shropshire. He is more than a client: he is a friend."

He broke off, and Mistley spoke.

"My wife has finished her drawing," he said. "Shall she send it to you or shall I bring it here?"

"Bring it here," answered Parkyn. "Mrs. Ambrose, I regret to say, does not feel the picture to be one of Mrs. Mistley's most successful achievements. As you will be the first to admit, with a catalogue illustration we want a certain quality. The picture must be helpful to the potential purchaser. Otherwise, why have it?"

"That's what Aveline felt," said Peter. "I believe you'll like it, Mr. Ambrose."

"I trust so," replied the master, and went his way.

"You must admit he's always anxious to be agreeable," said Geoffrey.

"He is — he's always amazing," answered Peter. "Even I begin to admire him, I believe. The war must have hit him hard, but he keeps calm and never grumbles. I'm wondering how it will go with the married men, when they're called up to the army."

"You don't come under the head of the married men."

"I know; but it doesn't alter the fact that I am married, does it? How is my bob a day, or whatever it is, going to cover my rent and taxes and servant and wife and life assurance, and one or two other things?"

"Mr. Ambrose will take back every member of his staff — who returns."

"Yes; but in the meantime?"

"No doubt the Government will act. My case is difficult, too. My heart is not quite all it should be unfortunately, and the chief wants me, of course, if I can be 'starred'; but I'm not sure, even if I can't join the army, whether I oughtn't to chuck this and make munitions."

"Aren't you? I shouldn't have thought there was a shadow of doubt. But I dare say you'll be saved the trouble of deciding."

"I want to pass, naturally. Don't think I'm less conscious of my duty than you are. I'm taking more exercise, and I'm doing Müller's gymnastics, too. It will be a great shock to me if they turn me down."

Peter knew the other lied, but was not at the trouble to argue. Geoffrey left the studio presently and sought Gregory Mushet, who was busy in the packing sheds. Under a half light, and surrounded by countless shelves and drawers of ripened bulbs and corms, Gregory worked with a dozen boys, and was called to keep his eye on all twelve at once.

"I'm going down to Brightlingsea to-morrow, Mushet," said Seabrook, "and it occurred to me that I might be of

service to you. I know Mr. Samuel Mushet, your brother, the engineer on the Fishery steamer, lives there, and if I might carry a message, or do you any service, it will be a pleasure."

Mr. Mushet considered.

"And very kind, I'm sure. We're not much of letter-writers, me and him. But there is a thing. Madge said at breakfast only to-day she wondered how my nephew Teddy was going on. He's gone to France and that's all we know."

"I'll certainly call and inquire," promised Seabrook. "What's the address?"

He learned it and received Mr. Mushet's thanks. Then the latter went back to his tulips and bulbous irises, his scillas and crocuses, his wonderful lilies, great and small. For "Colneside" grew the finest lilies in England, and from the giant lily, whose home was in the misty heights of the Himalayas, to the least dainty gem from Japan; from the great, tigred, swamp lilies of America and the snowy trumpet lilies of Bermuda, to the glories of auratum and speciosum, there was no such variety or quality as the reaches of the river-side gardens provided.

Seabrook took himself off next day. His purpose was to learn where William Ambrose might be found and pay him a visit. He went with open mind, hoped heartily to find the tramp beyond the reach of doing further mischief, and trusted that it might be possible to make the man feel friendly towards himself. He did not trouble his head with the problem before learning its factors, for if strategy proved needful, it must depend upon the attitude of the other party.

His only care was to conceal the fact of his visit from anybody. He had received further information from Helena by post, and, concerning William Ambrose, he learned that he abode with a member of the *Pecwit's* crew, Thomas Darcy, the brother of Emma.

Full of urbanity, the young man called at the dwelling

of the Mushets' in Brightlingsea, and Nancy Mushet answered to his summons.

"I come from 'Colneside,'" he said. "I am here for a while, and my friend, Mr. Gregory, your brother-in-law, is he not? asked me to call. I'm Mr. Seabrook."

Nancy bade him to enter and he did so, sat in the parlour, and begged her to be seated.

"I shan't detain you, Mrs. Mushet. Gregory and Miss Mushet, who both work with us, you know, were anxious at not hearing the last news concerning your son, Teddy."

"We've heard nothing, sir."

"No news is good news."

"We tell ourselves so. It's a cruel strain. To think these millions of harmless, valuable men should all be swept away at the bidding of a madman, to build a wall of living flesh and blood for him to batter! It's an outrage against God — that's what I say."

"Nothing happens that is not permitted by an All-seeing Wisdom, Mrs. Mushet," replied Seabrook. "We must not repine. We are going through a fearful ordeal, and our Maker has willed that we make this sacrifice for the good of humanity and the triumph of His cause. It is a glorious thing to feel you have a son in God's army. I speak, of course, as a Christian first and a patriot afterwards."

Nancy regarded him.

"You're young, and you speak as you feel," she said; "but nature is nature and Christianity can't kill nature. Christianity can do a lot of things; but it can't make a fool a wise man, and it can't make a mother's heart anything but a mother's heart."

"True, true," admitted Seabrook. "And no man reverences the maternal instinct more than I do. Did not Christ himself reverence it?"

He uttered further religious sentiments, then came to the matter in his mind.

"I attended the last Opening of the Fishery and had the pleasure of seeing your husband and the crew of the *Peewit*. It was a privilege to meet them. There was a middle-aged man called Darcy, I remember — rather a striking personality."

"He's been on the steamer as long as any of them."

"A freeman, like Mr. Mushet?"

"Just the same. He's a very good chap."

"One would like to meet him again."

Mrs. Mushet was not a gossip, but she spoke now of Tom Darcy's difficulties.

"Coming from 'Colneside' you'll know, of course, about Mr. Ambrose's brother, William?"

"A little. I never inquired. It's a sad business."

"He's with Darcy."

"Where?"

"The last cottage in the row up the hill. He's been a thorn in Tom's side for a long time. But, for his sister's sake, he can't do anything."

"A terrible tragedy."

"The drink's done it."

"For such people," said Geoffrey, "one is almost tempted to wish them dead, not only for the sake of the living, but for their own sakes. We may not justify our existence in this world, Mrs. Mushet, but be sure we shall have to do so in the next."

Nancy approved this sentiment. She began to respect Mr. Seabrook, yet felt a discrepancy between his appearance and the excellent opinions that apparently guided him along the road of life.

"Darcy will be home about four o'clock, I expect, if you want a word with him," she said. "And Mr. Mushet will be back the same time."

"I'd dearly like to see Mr. Mushet if it was possible," he declared.

"Would you favour us and drink a cup of tea, if you're not going home sooner, sir?"

"I shall be delighted, if you're quite sure I may. It's most kind. I must go for a tramp now and get some sea air. What hour will be convenient?"

He planned to be back again at half-past four and then departed. He knew that Darcy would not be at home, but guessed that Emma Darcy must be there with the disabled William.

The house proved easy to find, and he strolled about until the coast was clear, then popped in.

Emma admitted him, and he told her that he was come from Mrs. Ambrose.

"She's sorry to hear that your man is so ill," he said. "I was down here for a breath of sea air, and I wanted to see some old acquaintance too, your brother among them, so it fitted in very well."

Emma regarded him doubtfully.

"What d'you want along with my brother?" she asked.

"Just the pleasure of a chat. We met on the *Peewit* at the Opening of the Fishery last August."

"William sent word for you."

"And I was so glad I could come. I hope he's better."

"He nilly croaked two nights ago. But doctor gave us a mite o' comfort to-day. And William finds he don't want to die yet."

"Die! Of course not. Is he up to seeing me?"

"I'll ask him," she answered, and presently returned to say that the sick man would thank Seabrook to come up.

"Saturday's moon is good for nought, as everybody knows," explained Emma, "and there was a full moon Saturday, and it done Billy a lot of harm. But he's making up now."

The sufferer was in bed, and appeared to be fairly clean and collected. The room was sweet and the window wide open.

Seabrook offered to shake hands and William saluted him.

"Now you can go about your business," he said to Emma. "Me and this man will talk. He'll be here half-an-hour, I dare say, if he can breathe the air so long. God knows I won't stop under a roof more than another week, live or die."

"I'll run out, then," answered Emma, "and buy a thing or two."

She pulled a curtain from a corner and revealed a row of pegs. Upon one hung her dreadful coat and hat with the turkey feather. These she donned and departed. Geoffrey saw her to the top of the staircase and gave her a half-sovereign.

"Get him anything he fancies," he whispered, "and don't mention me to anybody for the moment."

She nodded, descended and went her way, while the visitor returned, offered William a cigarette, and sat on a cane chair beside the sick man.

There were no witnesses to their conversation, but Seabrook was very guarded and soon angered William. The invalid proved sober but reckless. He used language wild and vile, and laughed at Geoffrey. In the younger man's opinion, he was not dangerous.

"Well, 'Moustache,' and how is she?" asked Billy.

"How are you? That's the point."

"You want me to peg out, of course. You've been in a devil of a stew, I expect, and hoped every day to hear I was dead and you were safe. And if I was to tell you my brother was a scoundrel, and a low thief, and a hypocrite, you'd not believe it."

"Come, come, he's not so bad as all that."

"Of course you praise him. That's your game. Greater love hath no man than this: that a man lay down his wife for his friend. Ha! ha! You're deep, you little cock-sparrow, you're deep! But I'm deeper. Deep as hell — and shall soon be in it."

"Pull yourself together."

"You haven't come from my blighted brother, or anything like that?"

"No, no."

"Shall I tell him?" asked William, "and bitch up your show and have you fired out of 'Colneside'; or shall I use you against him, and score off him before it's too late?"

"Can you fairly say he's used you ill?"

"Yes, as badly as you've used him. I've forgiven the swine a thousand times and made allowances for his ignorance. But I don't want to die without scoring off him."

"The best sort of score is to forgive him again."

"You can preach to me — after Mersea Island! You've got a front of brass. Why should I forgive him?"

"You can't hurt him, anyway, so why fret about that? Better make friends, and then he'll look after you."

Billy reflected, and his bloodshot eyes stared steadily at Mr. Seabrook.

"You may wriggle and you may twist, but you're not going to bluff me," he said. "You've got to come down from your perch, my hero."

"You didn't send for me to make jokes. You wanted me to be useful. Mrs. Ambrose thinks a lot of you and Miss Darcy. She says you're the fine, fearless sort and scorn the herd."

"And what do you think?"

"It takes all sorts to make a world. We can't all be wandering philosophers like you."

"Or secret blackguards like you."

"Come, come! Those who live in glass houses — eh?"

"Ah!" chuckled Billy. "That's better. Now you're getting down to bed rock. Now, perhaps, we can talk sense. If you admit you're a ——"

"I'm admitting nothing. Why should I — just to please you?"

"You're going to bluff it?"

“What does it matter to you? What d’you gain? You think the wife of my master is more to me than she ought to be?”

“Garn, you fool! I never thought that, or said it. I only want you to admit the truth. How the devil do I know what she ought to be, or oughtn’t to be? I’m not blaming you for your games. I’m blaming you for pretending to me, a bird of your own feather — a night hawk like yourself. Aren’t I good enough to be in the know? Ain’t my word good enough if I say I’m on your side, as I’m on the side of everybody who scores off my brother? Is it likely that I’ll quarrel with anybody that’s bested him?”

“Why d’you hate him?”

“There you are, wriggling again — anything but the straight answer to the straight question. You want to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds, you do. You want to follow your own way, yet keep in the herd, so that the herd shall protect you. You want to be sheep and tiger both, like most of your dirty sort. I wasn’t going to give you away.”

“Look here, William,” said Mr. Seabrook. “You’re wasting your strength and my time. Everybody’s got to run his life on his own lines, and you know very well that few people can exhibit the sublime indifference to other people that you and Emma do. You’re unique and all the rest of it, but you’re going from your own ideas by badgering others; because ‘live and let live’ is your motto. Mrs. Ambrose is very keen to help you; then why not let her? If you want to go on living, you ought to get away to the South of France, or the Cape, and escape next winter. Well, what’s the good of falling out with people who could work that for you?”

William did not answer. He would have liked to take Geoffrey by the neck and knock his curly head against the wall; but he lacked the strength.

“What d’you think of my brother?” he asked sud-

denly. "What does Helena say to you about him? But there — don't answer — don't waste lies on me. We're not going to be pals, so I'll tell you what I think of him. He's the biggest damned hypocrite in Colchester — after yourself."

Seabrook ignored this insult.

"I always understood you made allowances for his conventional bent of mind."

An intellect that had been brilliant but for the defects that ruined it, was knitting now against the sleek Geoffrey. At his best, William was still more than a match for the younger man. Thoughts struggled in the elder's head. He saw that he was losing the little bit of fun that he had planned, that Seabrook would confess nothing and did not intend to involve himself. Thereon an attitude of tolerance to the draughtsman was changed. Billy could forgive him for being a humbug and hypocrite to the world; he could not forgive him for being a humbug and hypocrite to him. Even Helena had not been a humbug and hypocrite to Emma. She had tacitly admitted the sharing of a secret.

He had a bad fit of coughing and was weary. He pointed to a bottle on a chest of drawers and Seabrook helped him to some medicine.

"You're one too many for me, I reckon," confessed William, when he recovered from the paroxysm.

"No, I'm not. I tell you I want to serve you if I can."

"Begin by hating Parkyn Ambrose, then."

Emma returned at this juncture in time to hear William pour a torrent of very foul and filthy abuse upon his brother.

She was much surprised, for William seldom took this line.

"Goodstruth!" she said. "What's the matter? Have 'Moustache' made you hate the man? Don't get so excited. It's bad for you, Billy."

Then she turned to Seabrook.

"What's the good of making him rage against your master?" she said.

"I'm not," declared Geoffrey. "No doubt there were faults on both sides; but that's no business of mine. I really don't know what your William wants me to do. I've come with a very fine suggestion from Mrs. Ambrose, and I don't want to hear anything about Mr. Ambrose."

"He won't admit nothing," said Billy, pointing at the visitor. "He won't admit my brother's a swine, and he won't even admit he's a love-hunter himself and gathers his roses where he may. He wants to be a psalm-singer and a Christian, and all that — to me, as if there was no such place as the saltings on Blackwater. And if I asked him now to be a sportsman and help a dying man to get even with a certain party before it's too late, he wouldn't do it."

"I never said I wouldn't help you," answered the other. "I want to help you, only you won't give me a chance. Mrs. Ambrose saw Dr. Carbonell entirely on your behalf, and the doctor said that if you could be got out of England into a warm climate for the winter, and took a bit more care of yourself, you might live another ten years."

"Oo!" exclaimed Emma. "Think, William!"

"I don't want to live another ten years," declared the stricken man. "And I know that's rot, anyway. I'm booked, but I've got ideas."

"If your brother would help you big like that, you can take it, if it's only for my sake," said Emma.

"Don't mistake," explained Geoffrey. "It's not Mr. Parkyn's suggestion, Miss Darcy: it's the proposal of Mrs. Ambrose. She's always admired William and you, and felt very kindly to you. That's not humbug anyway, for you know it's true. And William needn't think I'm not friendly, because I am; and if it was in my power to do him a turn I would."

"The thing for William is to keep calm anyway," said Emma, "and I want for him so to be."

Seabrook rose.

"I'll come and see you both again," he said. "Talk it over with him. If he can be patched up and go for a sea voyage, he may be saved. And if he doesn't like that idea and thinks I can help him in any other direction, I'm game to do it."

William nodded and grew quieter. Then the other soon took his leave. When Emma had seen him off, she returned to the sick man and ventured to praise Mr. Seabrook.

"He means well, 'Moustache' do. Think if we was to go to a hot, sunny place, how you'd be able to enjoy yourself, Billy."

"He's a dirty dog and crooked as a sickle," declared the sufferer. "But he's clever, though not so clever as me. I've got ideas."

"We've never bin foreign," she said. "I'd love to go along wi' you. 'Twould be a very fine thing to have a dollop of money for once."

He shook his head.

"Far beyond me. But I won't die without a splutter. And I'll get something out of that dog yet."

And in the meantime Geoffrey went his way and modified his plans a little. He spent the morning in walking, lunched at the "King's Head" and was at the Hard before the *Peewit* returned. Then, after the boats laden with the cullers and cleaners had come ashore, he marked Mr. Mushet arrive with other hands from the steamer. Seabrook remembered the russet brown of the engineer's apparel and quickly scraped acquaintance. Thomas Darcy, however, he could not see, for Tom stopped aboard, since it was his turn to be watchman until the morrow.

"I must meet him another time, then. I've called at his house and seen those unfortunate people, his sister

and William Ambrose, and now I'm coming to tea at your wife's invitation."

Samuel had no recollection of Seabrook, but took him at his word. They spoke of "Colneside." Then the draughtsman asked for information on oyster lore.

He enjoyed his tea, expressed his great regret at the situation of Emma and Billy, hoped it presently might be ameliorated, and went so far as to hint at the wishes of Billy's sister-in-law.

"Don't let it go farther," he said, "for it is, of course, a very confidential matter; but I believe we may soon hear that they will be induced to leave England, if the man recovers his health sufficiently to do so."

"He won't," declared Samuel. "Darcy tells me he's on his beam ends, and doubts if he'll ever leave his bed again except for his coffin."

Geoffrey sighed.

"One can easily guess what a terrible trial it must have been for his brother, Mr. Parkyn Ambrose."

"A proper skeleton in the cupboard, no doubt, and he'll be thankful to God when he pegs out."

With many thanks for their hospitality and assurances of a future visit, Seabrook left them; and it was in the train on his way home that the first dim sheet lightning of a great inspiration flashed in his mind. So shadowy was it that it escaped him. It came like a night mist — invisible to the wanderer, yet felt by its effect on temperature. It almost chilled him. He flung it aside, but it returned in shape a little less amorphous, and by the time he reached home he felt not prepared to say the infernal idea was vain. Billy Ambrose himself had indicated the possibility. He believed that Billy was dying and that he would never leave Tom Darcy's home again; but there remained in him immense possibilities, given skill from outside to develop them. The inspiration made the young man's heart beat swifter. Here was such an intrigue as he judged his brains well fitted to conduct and

control. The danger was great, and upon the duration of Billy's life everything depended; but success meant something so far-reaching and complete, that Seabrook knew no labour on his part, no sacrifice of time and thought, no reasonable risk could be too great, if they but brought him to the goal.

The dark side of the picture centred in this: that Geoffrey would be called to lift the mask in one quarter and suffer another man to know a little of the truth about himself. The need to do so he hated; indeed only one conceivable situation could justify such a hazard, and it remained to be seen whether chance would create that situation.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE SPIDER

AVELINE met Emma Darcy a few days after Seabrook's visit to Brightlingsea, and seeing her alone on Colchester High Street, made inquiries and learned that William was no better.

"He's fading," said Emma, "and the bitter thing is that nobody cares a damn but me. A wonderful man like William — and nobody cares."

"But there's life yet and you to nurse him. You must be hopeful, Emma."

"I would be if he wanted to live. He's got such a will that if he said 'I'll live,' then he'd do it. But he don't. He's fed up with life. That Helena's kindness alive and would let us go away to a place in the sun somewhere if William would get well; and he could, and I'm at him night and day to do it — for my sake, if not his own."

Presently Emma begged Aveline to come and see William.

"He likes you. If you was to beg him to recover and go to France, I lay he'd go. If he knew there was one here and there that wanted him to keep alive, it might spur him to do it. But feeling nobody cares a mite how soon he's underground ——"

"I must come if you put it like that," said Aveline. "Let's go and buy something for him now."

Emma had come for fruit.

"He's taken a fancy for grapes," she said. "They quench him."

Two days later Aveline visited Brightlingsea and spent an hour with the sufferer.

"Last night he skeered me in a fit," confessed Emma, before they went to the upper chamber where Billy lay. "Half after two I thought he was a goner. And I called up Tom — that's my brother — and begged William for God's sake not to leave me. Then he turned better and said he weren't going for a bit yet, till he'd evened things up here and there. He's got his knife into his brother now. That's a new turn, you may say."

They went up and found William calm and cheerful. Aveline had brought him a packet of choice cigarettes, and he thanked her and began smoking them at once.

"Light up," he said to her, "and you too, Em. Smoke does me good. I'm sick of the housen. There's nought more blasted to look at than a ceiling if you're used to stars in the sky. The sky's alive, and now it's clouds and now it's stars, and you get thought out of it; but a square of whitewash — There's a big spider lives up in the corner. He's taught me a thing or two."

The man pointed to a grey web two yards from his head.

"We understand each other," said William. "He knows me and I know him. Catch the beggar a fly, Emma."

"He's that human," said Emma, "that he's got to know us and trust us."

"And I'm a spider, too," said William, "and I'll have my fly yet afore I die."

Emma captured an unlucky house-fly, stood on the bed, and thrust the creature into the edge of the spider's web. Scarcely had her hand left it when from out of its cone flashed a black hairy little shape, grabbed the fly, and retreated.

Aveline shivered.

"However can you sleep with that wretch so near?" she asked.

"It's the cherub that sits up aloft," explained Emma. "That's what Billy calls it. He says they've got an understanding — him and the spider. We don't mind

creatures except the stingers. We've slept under a wasp's nest afore now and never knowed it until morning, haven't we, William?"

"There's only one wasp in the world," said William, "and he's called Parkyn Ambrose, Esquire, and I'm the spider that's going to suck his blood yet."

"Don't you begin that. Here's 'Grey Eyes' come to have a nice talk and cheer you up. She's been painting a picture for your brother, and is going to get money by it."

"Paint him a picture of me lying here — brought here by him," said Billy. "And paint these hairy arms and my yellow teeth, and tell him these arms will be round his neck and those teeth in his windpipe yet. Tell him he's a dying man — tell him ——"

He stopped and laughed at Aveline's horrified face.

"I'm teasing you," he said. "Parkyn's all right. I wouldn't hurt him. Why should I? Such a brother as he's been to me. I'll make a good end, you know. But it's his place to come and close my eyes."

"I'm sure he'd come if you wished it," said Aveline.

Then the man blazed out again.

"Curse the fat dog! He's done things I wouldn't like a bird on a tree to see me do, or that spider in the corner."

"Let alone Gord," added Emma.

"And the crushing thing is that he's built not to know he's wrong. If the justice of blasted law books and blasted lawyers is on his side, then he don't care who suffers. He looks to the law, like decent creatures look to the Almighty. Mercy and the human heart, that hunger to tear the law books and brain the men that wrote 'em — what does he know of them?"

"If it's left out of him, he can't help it," said Aveline.

"There's many things left out that human kindness can put in, however," argued Emma.

"So there is — the woman's right. There's such a thing as opening the eyes of the blind and softening the

heart of stone; but not with Parkyn Ambrose. He'll hear his wife's played him false if I choose to tell him. And what would he do? Would he look into his own withered soul for the reason?"

"Goodstruth! Do shut your mouth, Billy!" cried Emma, her eyes round with alarm.

"I shan't shut my mouth — not to this woman, anyhow. I lay she knows a darned sight more about it than we do, for that matter. They're pals, ain't they? She knows that dapper little devil's my sister-in-law's fancy man. And as for the husband, I've pitied him all my life; but I won't pity him no more. He's got it in the neck, and I'm glad he has."

He had exhausted himself and pointed to a bottle.

"Didn't you know?" asked Emma of Aveline.

"It can't be — it's wild nonsense," she answered.

William panted and spoke again more quietly.

"Tell the fool she needn't worry. I ain't going to give her away. She was always sporting to us, anyhow. She'll live to put a fine marble tomb over my bones yet. And you tell her there must be room for Emma to creep in it, when she's through."

The extraordinary interview lasted but a short time longer, for Aveline felt herself useless, and Emma was evidently anxious for her to be gone. William said he wanted to sleep, and they left him.

"He'll sleep a long time now," said Emma. "When he's been chattering in that way it knocks him out, and he's like a lamb for a bit after. And for Gord's sake don't you take no notice of what he's been saying, 'Grey Eyes.' If his sister-in-law thought he was telling people, she wouldn't offer to help no more. Very like she'd have the law of him instead. She'd have to do it to save her face."

"You can trust me," promised the other. "Of course it's all mad nonsense. But William's evidently very ill, or I'm sure he wouldn't say such things."

"It's true enough, for that matter. The young man was over here a bit ago talking to William and trying to calm him down. However, least said soonest mended, and I'll pray you forget about it."

"You can trust me; I'll come again some day. Send me a postcard or come and see me, if I can be any good."

Then Aveline went her way, and Peter only learned that she had been to Brightlingsea, visited Emma Darey, and found the brother of Parkyn Ambrose apparently dying.

"The sooner the better — poor devil."

"And he might have been successful, too. He's ever so much more interesting than Mr. Ambrose. And now I believe he's going mad."

"Don't you be too busy in that quarter," advised Peter. "It's a polite fiction at 'Colneside' that there's no such person as Billy."

"I won't speak of him, of course," she answered. "We know that our Mr. Ambrose is ever so good — in the most horrid acceptation of the word — and I know Billy is ever so bad; but, all the same, I dare say if Mr. Ambrose had treated him differently Billy wouldn't hate him now."

"He's sodden, and his brain is probably done for. We can only hope he'll die soon."

From that moment Aveline's thoughts were entirely occupied with Helena, and her heart went out to her. She devoted her mind to the wife of the master of "Colneside" and soon found abundant sympathy flowing for that lawless lady. Shared virtues and a kindred enthusiasm for well-doing are good cement; but shared errors and common weakness bring souls into still closer terms of trust.

Helena and Aveline had been drawn together by a general tolerance which they found reflected in each other; but each had kept such secrets as she possessed. Helena confessed to no irregularity, but forgave irregularity in others, while Aveline took the same course. They both admitted sympathy with William and Emma; they both

declared hatred of the stuffy regulations of their middle-class life; while as time went on and their friendship ripened, they enlarged the limits of their toleration and supported each other in their private opinions and attitude to existence.

Helena envied Aveline the possession of a husband free from prejudice; and Aveline, while admitting her good fortune, nevertheless confessed that Peter, while large-minded enough before marriage, was tinctured with a very definite stability and respect for tradition, after all. He had even modified her own former opinions in some directions. Whereon Helena replied that Parkyn, far from modifying her opinions in any direction, only served to harden them.

Aveline went to lunch at West Mersea and found her friend depressed.

"For heaven's sake, be bright to-day," said Helena, "for I'm in doleful dumps — full of private bothers and, on the top of them, we've got a perfectly deadly man staying with us. One of that hopeless sort of people who love the rare better than the beautiful — the kind that collects postage stamps and gets pleasure out of them. Awfully like my husband in every way, and Parkyn seems to think he's found his second self. A great gardener, of course. They've gone to Colchester, and Dr. Carbonell's going to show him the museum. Carbonell will want to put him into a bottle or something, for he's a museum specimen himself. However, my husband thinks he's charming."

"What a bore for you."

"Tell me about Billy. You went to see him, I know. But I haven't heard again — poor wretch."

"Mr. Seabrook has been down, too, and Emma wants to go; but William says he'll die here. And he threatens he's going to do all sorts of dreadful things before he dies. You know the mad way he talks."

Helena had changed colour very visibly at this speech, and Aveline, whose heart was bursting with sympathy,

observed it. But she had spoken thus crudely on purpose, as a prelude to more startling words. She did not believe William's assertions with regard to Helena and Geoffrey Seabrook. She assured herself stoutly that it must be the lie of a drunken and worthless man; but, perceiving the danger of such statements, she intended to warn Helena. Had she believed the story, she would not have touched the subject; but she did not believe it and, judging that loyalty to her friend demanded frankness, now spoke. For the situation embraced dreadful possibilities. If William were indeed dying, his brother might visit him at the last, and since William had openly promised to do some desperate thing with the fag end of his life, it was possible that he meant an outrage at Helena and Seabrook's expense. There were hopeful features in the story, for Billy had explicitly stated he did not mean to give Helena away; but that was not surety sufficient of the sick man's intentions. Apart from any other aspect of the situation, Helena's husband might stand in physical danger himself, which fact alone it was but right that Helena should know.

"You've got to listen to me now," said Aveline. "That's only the beginning. He told me a whole budget of horrible lies and ideas he's got. He's dangerous, frightfully dangerous, Helena, and though he says he doesn't mean any harm to you, he does mean harm to your husband."

Helena looked relieved.

"Don't you worry. I dare say he hates Parkyn — that's natural; though, with all his faults, Parkyn has tried to be a good brother to him."

"It's more you I'm frightened for than anybody — you and Mr. Seabrook."

"Good gracious, my dear child, what d'you mean?"

"I mean he's saying — that Mr. Seabrook — oh, Helena — that he's your lover. Emma begged him to shut his mouth, but he rambled on, saying horrible things

and threatening horrible things — not against you, or Mr. Seabrook — but against your husband. I think he's mad; but you ought to know. He doesn't mean any harm to you, but the mere fact that he can say such things to me ——”

The other collapsed. She gave a low wail and began to cry. Aveline went to her and put her arms round her.

“I had to tell you, dearest Helena. It wouldn't have been fair not to tell you. And I wouldn't mind an atom if it was true a hundred times over.”

The other seemed to have lost her senses for the moment. She stared and let her tears fall down her face. She had lost all grip. She wandered.

“God — God — God! We always bring in God, if there's a disaster, or misery, or tragedy in the air, don't we? When we're happy and having a good time, we never mention Him. We say, ‘Oh, my God!’ when we're in a mess, never when we're happy. It's true. I've got a lover, and those people know it.”

Aveline comforted her with lawless joy. A flame of passionate sympathy blazed up in her.

“Glory in it! Glory in it!” she said. “Don't cry. Why shouldn't you love him? Why shouldn't he love you? How can either of you help it? And I'm sure there's nothing to be frightened of.”

“He told you. You might have been an enemy.”

“He knew we were friends. He thought I knew it already. Cheer up, Helena. Be brave! What does anything in the world matter, if you've got somebody to love you and understand you?”

“Life seems to be crumbling and slipping away,” moaned Helena. “Be loyal to me, Aveline. Don't you turn from me, child.”

“Not for anything in the world. You've always been good to me, and we think alike a thousand ways.”

Aveline was prepared to serve Helena in any way she might suggest; but Helena, heartened by this champion-

ship, explained that Geoffrey Seabrook had the matter in hand.

"I can trust him and he can trust me; and I worship you for offering to help me," she said. "I'm not the least frightened really, because William's word is quite worthless, and if he attempted to insult me it would be taken from whence it comes and be ignored. But my only fear is that Geoffrey may be called away to serve before those two are packed off out of England, or William dies."

It was dark before they parted, and Aveline set off homewards in the omnibus. Helena saw her off, kissed her many times before she started, and declared that her support was the most precious, heartening and tonic feature of a sad life.

"I often longed to tell you," she said. "Now I see how feeble I was not to. Now I have the blessed knowledge that you are on my side. That's a tower of strength to me, you lovely thing. You don't know what I've suffered and what my temptations were."

"Yes, I do," answered the other. "Exceedingly well I know."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE GUEST

PARKYN AMBROSE, amid grave distractions, found time for courtesy to his guest. Mr. Wargrave Mortimer was a man from the north of England, favourably known at "Colneside" as a skilled horticulturist and a valuable customer. And now, on better acquaintance, Parkyn found that the gentleman chimed pleasantly with his own opinions and shared his general views of life and its obligations. The visitor was a man of good means, but not wealthy. His life embraced scientific interests. He busied himself with the hybridising of the iris family and brought with him a gift, in the shape of some new crosses between Korolkowi and *Oncocyclus*, which Mr. Ambrose was to propagate and put on the market.

In person Wargrave Mortimer was tall, dark and clean shaved. His face was handsome, but his expression never varied and his full grey eyes never changed. He was deliberate, courteous and obviously a man of refined instincts, unrelieved by humour. His voice was well-bred and his views amazingly reactionary. Even Mr. Ambrose felt mild surprise to hear a man ten years younger than himself preserve the pre-war attitude. But while obstinate and stiff-necked in opinion, Wargrave Mortimer proved considerate in manner. He was didactic, but quite prepared to give and take. He listened to his host and they applauded each other frequently.

Now at the entrance to the Moot Hall, upon the morning of the day when Aveline went to see Helena, Ambrose and Mortimer met Dr. Carbonell, and the guest, in anticipation, thanked the doctor for his courtesy.

"This is more than kind, to devote time to a stranger," he said.

"A pleasure. I'm delighted to oblige, for one can't do better than serve a kindred spirit."

But Carbonell spoke without knowledge, as presently appeared, for the man from the north proved no kindred spirit to him.

Ambrose left them together. He was to return and entertain them at luncheon some hours later.

"Here are our heroes," declared the doctor, pointing to the front of the Moot Hall. "Audo, Audley, Gilbert, who tradition says gave Queen Elizabeth her first electric shock, and Harsnett."

Mr. Mortimer gazed up at the stone figures.

"These do not interest me," he said. "Indeed there is little here likely to do so save the ring of bells. I am a keen student of campanology."

"Then we'll go aloft," answered the energetic guide; "but you must let me set the pace. Our bells are very fine, though not ancient, indeed not twenty years old. We have a gentleman among us who descends from a refugee Flemish family which settled in Colchester during Tudor times. Flanders, as no doubt you know, is the land of bells and beautiful carillons, or was till the accursed Germans struck them dumb. Our friend has no doubt inherited his love of these things. At any rate he has written masterly mottoes for the bells."

They ascended by slow stages, and when he had got his breath, Dr. Carbonell expatiated on the view from the tower; but the courteous voice of the other cut him short.

"I am near-sighted, unhappily, and can see nothing to interest me, though doubtless your view is fine. The bell-chamber ——?"

"Five bells we have, and they sound 'The Westminster Chimes.'"

Mortimer examined the monsters ranged in the dim bel-

fry. Then he brought out his notebook and transcribed the inscriptions.

"Great art and sympathetic understanding goes to those verses," declared Carbonell, and the other agreed with him.

"Your praise is well justified," answered the visitor, as he set down the bell mottoes in order.

I

"Placed here on high,
We serve the town,
Beneath the crown,
Beneath the sky.

II

Differing in size,
In note and weight,
Yet, small or great,
We harmonise.

III

With measured speech,
Well-timed and true,
Our message due
We tell to each.

IV

Brief, clear and bold
We say our say,
And then straightway,
Our peace we hold.

V

O mortal race,
Our lesson learn;
Each has his turn,
And time, and place."

"The 'crown' of the first inscription is above us," explained Dr. Carbonell. "The tower is surmounted by a large crown."

"They are wholly admirable — perfect bell music and masterly in their thought," declared Wargrave Mortimer. "I have read none better."

But though the duties of the guide began thus pleasantly, the agreement of the men did not extend much farther. Mr. Mortimer was as full of theories as the doctor, and their theories began to clash. They differed on technical questions respecting the Roman walls; they differed as to the Norman origin of Colchester Castle; they differed upon a multiplicity of minor points respecting the museum pottery. A courtesy almost pitiless marked Mortimer's contradictions; while the doctor, long accustomed to be regarded as the first authority on all questions of local archæology, grew warm. The curator of the museum supported Carbonell; the visitor preserved a somewhat biased attitude. He was, however, amazed at the wonderful wealth of the collection, and annoyed the local antiquaries by declaring that the finest specimens of Roman glass and glaze should be in the National Museum.

"Why?" asked Dr. Carbonell. "This is a national museum just as much as the British."

"I venture to think that a parochial outlook," declared Mortimer. "Where one can see them here, a thousand would be privileged to do so in London."

"You speak as though Colchester were at the antipodes," retorted the other.

"No, no; I merely state a fact. Your marvellous riches are not adequately known. Take myself: I should have made this pilgrimage years ago had I guessed at the treat in store. But I think an expert from headquarters would display the collection and arrange it to better purpose."

"I'm glad I don't agree with you," replied the other. "In my judgment the arrangement and system are perfect."

Imperturbed, Mr. Mortimer continued his perambulation, and presently, declaring himself fatigued, we went into the air and sat awhile with Carbonell in the Castle grounds. Their talk passed to the war, and here again

the point of view was so diverse that the elder began heartily to weary of his task.

Mortimer, of course, entertained cut-and-dried opinions upon the conflict. They were conservative and religious. He spoke as one who had said the same thing, probably in similar words, a great many times.

"Germany designed to rise above the whole world, not on stepping-stones of her dead self, along the true and only line of progress for individuals or states; but upon stepping-stones of other people's dead selves. No enduring success could be supported on the foul foundations of such warfare. But we need a pure world for honesty to be the best policy in it, and the world is not pure, Doctor. It must be racked and refined and drawn from the lees for many a century yet before the ape and tiger in man is finally eradicated. War is the first and greatest refiner and alchemist of human character, and our prodigious war is helping on the noble work."

To Carbonell this was cant.

"You astound me," he answered. "Has reason no say in the argument?"

"The war is above reason."

"Beneath it, surely. If reason had her place in the sun, this accursed, misbegotten outrage would not have happened. Religion could not stop it, but reason would have done so."

"Can you assert so much?" asked the other.

"Can you doubt? Put this question. Did one man in fifty thousand of the inhabitants of Europe want the war? Had there been a public ballot of adult humanity, how many would have voted for it?"

"None would have dared."

"Exactly! To evade reason we have secret diplomacy, skulking like a reptile in the dens of the Chancellories. Religion was powerless, because impotent, as always, in any vital question of human welfare. Education and increasing knowledge have reduced her to an empty and

barbaric ornament. And reason was powerless for another cause: because she is denied any voice in human affairs, and suppressed by the State itself. The State knows that reason is the deadly enemy of religion, and in her blindness the State conceives an obsolescent creed more useful to her than the freedom of human thought that reason demands. So the State persecutes reason, suffers religion to adulterate education, and attacks rational progress, just as justice is attacked by the system of legal advocacy under which this nation groans. Some fool once said that he cared not who made the laws of the land if he were allowed to make the songs. Not till the laity make the laws will lawyers be put into their proper place. But this is by the way. I'm only arguing that when reason wins to the light, it will drag diplomacy into the light also; and that will be a big nail in the coffin of war. War arises from confusion of thought; and reason is the enemy of confusion of thought."

The visitor listened without visible emotion.

"I find myself utterly and absolutely out of harmony with your views," he said, when the elder had finished. "War is a divine ordinance. 'Carnage is God's daughter,' as Wordsworth so terribly and truly remarks. Shall you and I contradict Wordsworth? The State looks wisely to the support of the Church, and the Church is doing magnificent work in the war."

He proceeded in a familiar strain until the veteran could endure no farther.

"My dear sir!" he exclaimed. "Leave it. Let us talk of anything — pots, pans, oysters, neolithic man, the procession of the equinoxes; but not of what is present and real and vital. You choke me with the dead breath of the Middle Ages. We shall never convince each other."

"You'll never convince me, certainly, that reason is more than a walking-stick for human progress. The crutch must be religion, faith, childlike trust in One who knows the end from the beginning and who suffers evil

for His own purposes. Your futile free thought is like the sea foam bursting on the rock."

"Yes, it is," admitted the other. "We see no great mark of the foam's progress, because human life is short; but ask the rock. It will tell you that the wave wins in the long run. The static goes down before the dynamic, the dead before the living."

"But the Rock of Ages will never go down before the shifting currents of the human mind. Only Christianity holds the seed of everlasting life; all else is chaff."

He ran on, and the other tried irony and humour, but to no purpose.

Then there rose in Dr. Carbonell a measure of impatience, for he was not a very patient man.

"Well," he said at length, "I do honestly fear there's something wrong with the drains in the house where your soul dwells! Now I must be away. Tell Ambrose I shan't join you at luncheon. I'm busy still; for an ancient I have much to occupy my energies. And you'll both want to talk gardening, of which I know nothing."

He rose and shook hands.

"Thank you for your great courtesy," answered the visitor, smiling and bowing over the hand he shook. "I shall pray for you."

Staggered by this promise, Carbonell departed, secretly laughing at himself and his own absurd impatience; while Wargrave Mortimer presently joined his host.

He explained that the doctor would not be at luncheon.

"I'm very much afraid my views annoyed him. He is a man of strong but mistaken feeling. I think he knew I was getting the better of the argument, while he was getting the worse of his temper. An intelligent man; but, like all his class, prone to exaggeration and extremes. He reposes too much trust on that faulty guide: human reason. We must hope the Light will be vouchsafed to him before the end."

"What I always hope for him, too," declared Mr. Am-

browse. "A noble man; but of course there are none so blind as those who will not see."

Having dismissed the doctor, they turned to horticulture and passed an hour agreeably to them both. They then proceeded to "Colneside," and devoted the rest of the daylight to the alpinists, which enjoyed the visitor's special regard.

"After the iris," he said, "the flora of the granitic and limestone mountains has always been my particular delight. And when you visit me, as I hope next spring you will, you shall see how kindly your treasures have taken to my moraines and rock gardens."

They wandered then where, on an eastern slope of "Colneside," nigh the offices, there spread many hundreds of frames filled with tiny plants. The alpine gardens themselves were built here also, but the bulk of the immense collection flourished in pots inserted in beds of sand. Their glass houses were still uncovered, and the plants enjoyed the autumn sunshine and drank the nightly dews.

Saxifrage and campanula were Mr. Mortimer's special interests, for they thrived with him, and now he perambulated the frames, notebook in hand, and expatiated on what he saw. The enthusiasm of the collector was upon him, and a gathering row of little pots were set aside by Richard Bare, who waited upon his master.

They came upon Philip Pettikin at his eternal task of grubbing weeds, and Ambrose bid him approach. But Mr. Mortimer made no delay and revealed indifference. In fact, the human interest of the aged Pettikin did not attract him; perceiving which Mr. Ambrose dismissed Pettikin and felt a passing regret that his guest should have found no attraction in the venerable man.

But Mortimer was generous enough of praise for the growing things.

"Your nursery is an epitome of the botanical world, Mr. Ambrose," he said. "Indeed the world itself is a

nursery for that matter, and one can push the parallel far between men and plants.”

Only an hour or two later Wargrave Mortimer astounded his host, and brought amazing incident into the current of Parkyn's life.

They returned home in due course, and it was announced that the guest must depart on the following day. Relieved to know it, Helena became gracious to him and, before dinner, invited him, for the first time, into her own boudoir. They drank tea there, and Mrs. Ambrose, having occasion to speak to her husband, left the visitor for a little while alone. Five minutes later she returned to find Mr. Mortimer stretched insensible upon the carpet. In his fall it appeared that he had carried away a little easel on which stood the enlarged portrait of Aveline.

CHAPTER XXVIII

AT THE "KING'S HEAD"

SUCH an end game as Geoffrey Seabrook designed and hoped for his intrigue, demanded a certain attitude in William and a very definite limitation to William's future activities. After a second visit to the sick man, whereat he exhibited friendship, took gifts and played listener, Geoffrey perceived that Ambrose was dying in earnest, and desired, before he died, to be revenged upon his brother for many fancied wrongs. This was the situation that he had suspected at his first visit, and from which his inspiration sprang; but he was too cautious to assume its certainty, or to build upon the shifting foundations of Billy's ruined intellect until he satisfied himself that they could be trusted.

An evening visit he paid, and brought a bottle of old cognac. He explained how he had spoken with Helena and that she much hoped William was better, and might still consider the idea of a winter abroad.

"He is better, just a thought," said Emma, "but it's only a flicker, along of being took care of and lying in a good bed. A week ago he cried out to rise and sleep in a hayrick; and 'twas all me and my brother could do to over-persuade him. I know how he feels, for I feel the same, and hunger for the smell of hay and the cool night on your cheek, while your body's warm and snug. Billy's all on going out to 'The King's Head' to-night, for a talk with the chaps and a sight of a bar. He says 'twill be the last time as he'll ever see a pub, and he wants to do it while he's got strength. I pray him not to for my sake, but he says that a few more days, or less days, don't

matter now. He's full of wicked ideas, and I hope you'll calm him down. He's all up against Parkyn now, and 'tis a mercy he's beyond doing any harm, poor dear, else he might have planned some bad action and got in the newspapers."

"It's sad he feels like that. He's got a lot to be thankful for, if you consider. That reminds me. Mrs. Ambrose asked me to give you this, Emma."

He handed her a five-pound note.

"The Lord'll reward her. Yes, we've had our luck. What I always said was, 'Work for your bread and trust Gord for the butter'; but William is like they Barnados homes — trusts Gord for everything. And he's never been disappointed. He says it ain't luck, but virtue rewarded."

"I'll see him and try to get him into a better state of mind."

Billy greeted Seabrook with ribaldry, but presently calmed down. He insisted on having some of the old brandy, and repeated his intention of rising and presently spending an hour at the inn.

"I can very easily crawl there with an arm on each side. I want to see the boys once more and drink a drop from the pewter."

"You look better, if anything."

"Not me. But there's a shot in the locker yet — just one. And that's all I want. You clear out, Emma, and let me talk to 'Moustache.' Him and I have got secrets."

"No, no," murmured Seabrook. But Emma left them. It was dusk, and she hung up a blanket over the white blind after lighting a candle.

"Mustn't show a blink of light nowadays, for fear of they Zepps," she said.

"How's my blasted brother?" asked William, as soon as the woman had departed.

"I don't think he knows about your illness. Why not write and tell him?"

"Perhaps I shall. But he knows all right. His wife's told him. And you know he knows, for that matter."

"Indeed I do not. She and I are very much concerned about you. She still thinks you might travel."

"Travel to hell. But not alone. I've got ideas. Only you're such a snaky sort of fool. Ain't we birds of a feather? Why can't you trust me? Any creature would trust a dying man, surely?"

"I don't distrust you, William. Why should I?"

"It's like this: I might do you a bad turn, but as I can only do you a bad turn with a man I hate, because he's a wicked scoundrel — my brother, I mean — there's no gain to me in doing it. I've no wish to harm you, or Jezebel. She's all right, and a very good friend to me. But you can help me, and if you won't, then I shall hinder you. That's all straight and fair."

"If I can help you, of course I will."

"Then you've got to drop the mask and not pretend any more. You can't have it both ways. If you're going to be the straight, God-fearing Christian and try to bluff me, I let up on you; if you tell me you're a natural man, up against society and out for your own hand, same as I was, then I'll use my fag end of life to do you a good turn. I want to know the naked truth about you. I do know it, for that matter. But last time you came you played about and pretended virtue and thought I didn't see through you. But I did. If you can say, 'I'm a damned humbug and only pretending, because you've got to pretend in this mean, lying world,' then I'll respect you and put you on to a good thing. If not, I'll bitch you up if I can, once for all."

Seabrook half expected this. He had thought quite as much of the future as Billy had thought of it; and had looked farther ahead.

He nodded towards the door.

"Nobody listening, I suppose?"

"Better go and see."

He did so. There were voices below, where Emma was talking with her brother, Tom Darcy. Then he returned and sat by William.

"Tell me what you want, and if I can help you I will — whatever it is."

"Now we're getting a move on. But you've been so damned double all your life that you can't make your lips confess it. I don't want much from you — only to get my brother to come and see me. You ought to be able to do that."

"Just to say 'good-bye' to him?"

"Yes; and just to start him on the road to the devil first."

Seabrook's heart beat quicker. It seemed too dangerously straightforward.

"He's the elder," said William. "It's right he should go first. I want to have my revenge. I want him to know I've cut his thread. You're hearing me, ain't you? You're getting it in — soaking it in? I shall be dead in six weeks, maybe less. But they can't hang a dying man. D'you see the game? What do you think of it? Nuts for you. You can't go to the wars and be shot then, because Jezebel will want you to help a lone widow and keep the gardens going. You'd be 'starred,' and presently you'll fill Parkyn's shoes and be boss of 'Colneside,' and Mayor of Colchester, and the saviour of the poor, and have a marble statue put up to you when you go to Heaven. Good enough — eh?"

"Are you sane to say such things?"

"Saner than the three witches that fooled Macbeth. They wrecked him with tricky lies that looked like truth. I'm not deceiving you. I can make your fortune if you'll let me, and bring my brother to my bedside. A plain deal and a damned good bargain for you. And well you know it."

Mr. Seabrook took a thimbleful of the old cognac.

"I must think of it," he said.

"You have thought of it."

"You're a genius. You're too deep and subtle for me, William."

"*Arcades ambo*. You're a bigger blackguard than I am, after all, if you can take this on. So the rest ought to be easy. Come back next week and use your wits to help me put a touch or two to it. I'm sick, and can't see very clear. I only know that I want to do that chap in; and as that would pay you better than any man in the world, I come to you to help. And you will. Call Emma and Tom. I'm going out to drink now — for the last time."

"What about Emma?"

"She's all right. She's not a humbug. A saint of God, that woman. She's terrible vexed with me for hating Parkyn. I'll drop that with her now. I'll pretend I'm going to make a good end, see? And so I shall make a good end. That bit of fun's all that's left for me now."

Seabrook declared that he saw the point.

"Think all round it," he said. "You're sporting to me and I'll be sporting to you. Why make up your mind to die? Why not chuck this savage idea and make up your mind to live?"

"I'm beyond that. I know I'm booked. There's more going on inside me than anybody can tell but me. You needn't worry yourself about that. You've got to thank your luck that things are as they are, and the consequences will be what they will be. See me again and then go bleating to him and say I'm dying and wish to see him. But I don't want to see him yet. Because once he comes, I must only have enough life left to put him down and out."

The other called Emma and Tom Darcy, then he bade William good-bye and departed.

Seabrook walked all the way home through an autumn night. He felt uneasily elated. What puzzled him was that his original inspiration should have found such an

exact echo in the mind of William Ambrose. He had been prepared to foment Billy's hatred of his brother, drop poison into the cup, and, with the best cunning that he knew, lead up to the present attitude of Billy's mind. But he came again to find that attitude already affirmed and developed. The sick man needed no mental aid from him; the only aid he asked was assistance in detail. Geoffrey feared a plot that developed so simply and surely. It was much too good to be true, and he began to search for pitfalls and ambushes. He intended to lie well out of danger himself, whatever happened. He believed William to be sincere, but was ready to circumvent him if he were not. If he feared anybody it was Emma.

Meantime Billy insisted on being dressed, and while his friends got him into his clothes, he bragged of the praise that Seabrook had bestowed upon him.

"He said I was a genius too deep for him. He knows a clever man when he sees one, that chap does. There'll be surprises presently. I may be grave-meat, but I've got a brain yet, and it's a brain far out of the common, and always was, and there'll be a bit of fireworks before the last light's out; and you'll live to see and wonder, Tom Darcy."

Emma pressed him for explanations.

"Such a dark member you grow," she said. "What's all this plotting and planning? I wish you could take your old point of view, because it was much more restful and high-minded."

"All very good sense," declared William, "and for that matter, 'Moustache' has been saying the same to me. You must know, Tom, that I've had a lot to endure from my brother, but up to now I've forgiven the dog. And now I've decided to go on the same way and forgive him to the end."

"A very wise thing to do," declared Mr. Darcy.

"We shall meet before the finish. But not yet. I'm going to forgive him."

"You will be talking as if you was going to die," whined Emma, "and very well you know there ain't no call for you to die, if you'd only give your mind to living. You ought to live, whether you want to or don't, for my sake. I've been a proper pal to you and you've been all the world to me, Billy, and what's going to come o' me if you die?"

"Don't you worry," he said. "You'll be all right. There's lots of fun for you yet."

"You didn't ought to die," she repeated, "and it'll show you don't care a brass farden for me if you do."

They reached "The King's Head," and the apparition of William, long-haired and hollow-eyed, astonished not a little those who knew him. He was weak, and glad to sink into a corner by the fire.

"Wonders never cease," said Saul Rebow, skipper of the *Peewit*, who patronised "The King's Head."

"No doubt to a chap like you they never do," answered William. "But you wasn't born at mushroom time all the same, else they'd never have called you 'Tell-er-for-why.' Truth is, I'm going to be put to bed with a shovel before long."

"Stuff and nonsense," said Mr. Rebow. "You ain't going. You're all right. You did ought to have stuck to the oysters for a bit."

They encouraged him and hoped he would mend. The liquor flowed and a policeman came in.

"There's a chink o' light showing, missis," he said, "not enough to make a fuss about, but enough to swear by. You'll do well to lower the gas jet a thought and pull the curtain closer."

Emma spoke of an adventure.

"I see a motor-bike kill a cat this morning," she said. "Was on it and over it afore you could say knife. Cruel devils they soldiers on motor-bikes. 'Twould have been just the same if he'd killed a child."

"'Twas thought very dangerous to kill a cat in my young days," declared Saul Rebow. "For that matter

I've known it bring bad luck myself, though of course there's nothing to it really."

"Who can tell?" asked Emma. "There's a powerful lot of things that have a meaning to 'em, and though we forget them, very like they don't forget us."

The old woman behind the bar spoke.

"That's right, Emma Darcy," she said. "It don't follow because we don't believe in 'em, the things themselves be gone. Nobody believes in witches now; but I wouldn't say there was none left."

"Of course there's witches," answered Emma, "and if a witch come in and sot down, and you put an open knife beside her, she'd jump up again directly."

"There's wise women about yet," admitted Tom Darcy. "We've got a hand on the *Peewit*, and his daughter a while ago had her knee-cap off. Yes, she did, and went lame for two year; then her mother bethought her of a wise woman down Mersea way, and they went to her, and she stroked the girl's knee-cap, and three nights after it flew on again! That's a fact, and our mate would take his Boible oath to it. The same woman charmed ague out of a man, and the man's wife saw the ague wriggle out of the room like a snake, while the man was in a sort of an onsensed state. And he never had no ague from that day till his death."

Rebow nodded gravely and William jeered.

"I wish to God I could find the party," he said. "Perhaps she'd charm my rotten lungs away and give me a new pair."

"If I knew where she was, I'd seek her," declared Emma.

"She's dead," said Darcy. "But there's no doubt she had great powers. A more amazing thing was the horses and the carter and the cart. Good alive! Never was such a strange affair, and yet as true as gospel, for the carter told it again and many heard about it. Four hosses he had, and a great wain full of sacks of ground

corn. And he couldn't get up a little dip in the road. The hosses sweated and he sweated and whipped and cussed for all he was worth; but nothing would make 'em fetch the top of the hill. And by the side of the road was sitting the wise woman, in a grey hood and gown. She watched him for a bit, then in a pause, when he was tired of using language and the hosses were properly shivering, for they knew they was failing in their task, the woman said to him: 'Don't whip the hosses, whip the wheels, master.' Her voice, as he said after, wasn't like most women's voices. He was going to laugh, but he looked in her face and that stopped him. And though it seemed foolishness to do what she bade, he done it and lashed the wheels with all his might, and the waggon went up over the hill as easy as could be!"

"Such mysteries happen without a doubt," confessed Saul Rebow, "and I've no patience with them that laugh at them. No man knows all there is to know, and though I'm thought to have a reason for most things, I'd be the first to confess that I don't know the reason for a tale like that."

"Nor yet anybody but Gord," said Emma.

William was very quiet. He spoke little, and sat and listened to the company. He coughed presently, though the fit soon passed. He drank as much as he could, but his silence affected his companions and indicated the change in him.

He rose half-an-hour before closing time and beckoned to Emma.

"Get me back," he said. "Good-bye, boys. I shall never see a one of you again, but you won't forget me."

"Not likely, Billy. There'll be a good many stories about you going round for years, I shouldn't wonder," said the landlady.

"I'll give you something to talk about yet before I peg out," answered William Ambrose. "And when it happens, you remember what 'Old tel-yer-for-why' said just

now. 'No man knows all there is to know.' So long, all — till we meet again in a thirstier place."

He went out, and Emma took him slowly back to her brother's cottage; but Tom Darcy stopped on at the inn.

All agreed behind William's back that he was a doomed man.

"And none but himself to thank, poor useless wretch," said Mr. Rebow.

They argued then as to whether William could have helped his futile existence, or whether that had been beyond his power.

"Everything stood in his favour, and very respectable blood in his veins. So there's no excuse for him," asserted Darcy.

"The man's a sport, so all's said," explained Rebow. "There's sports in all created things, and they can't help being sports, and 't isn't for us to judge them, because the Lord wills them to be. Things beyond human knowledge get mixed in with human seed. And when you look round with seeing eyes, you often ask yourself how a man and woman ever find themselves brave enough to take a hand in the business of creation."

"They're beginning to feel that more and more," declared the landlady. "The bigger the wits the smaller the family nowadays. No sane female wants to bear man babies, in sight of this war. Who'd spend twenty patient years of bringing up fine boys to know they was to be blown to dust in other folks' quarrels at the end? You ask the robbed, red-eyed women about it and list to them. You ask Nancy Mushet, who heard yesterday her Teddy had fallen — her only one."

"Poor Samuel's properly cast down," said Darcy, "and so's the rest of us. He was a good, young, sea-loving chap, but no more made for fighting than his father."

Their talk sank into gloom, and a few minutes before closing time they departed.

CHAPTER XXIX

AVELINE'S LETTER

ON the morning after the last visit to Helena, Aveline received a letter from her friend, and guessing that the wife of Parkyn Ambrose must have more to say about herself, put the letter into her pocket until Peter had eaten his breakfast and gone to "Colneside." Looking back afterwards she remembered his breakfast talk was of the army, and his growing conviction that he ought to join and not wait longer for the calling of his Class. When he had left her she read the letter, and having read it, her mind fastened, as minds will, upon small issues, even in the light of crushing events. She felt thankful that she had not opened the letter until Peter's departure, and she wondered how long it would be before she saw Peter again.

In the very hour when her secret was entrusted to the bosom of Aveline, Helena had been faced with the former's own more tremendous mystery. Thus she wrote —

"Manor House,
"West Mersea.

"MY DEAR CHILD,

"An awful thing has happened — awful for you and awful for me, because I love you. Last night, soon after my husband and his friend returned home, Wargrave Mortimer, that's his name, fainted suddenly at sight of your big photograph in my boudoir. When he came to again, he apologised, and confessed that he had been physically upset by the shock of an astounding likeness. Then he asked about you, and heard things, and saw your

pictures and — my poor, precious dear, you know, only too well, who he is.

“Oh, my dear girl, why didn’t you confide in me, as I confided so frankly and freely in you? Every word I write bleeds for you and I shall stand beside you against the whole world. My husband and yours are talking privately. I don’t know what they are going to do. Does Peter Mistley know the truth? If so, all will be well in the long run. I must fly to catch post.

“Your devoted

“HELENA.”

In the moment of her overwhelming disaster, with life in ruins and the cost of her achievements suddenly calling to be paid, Aveline kept her nerve. An attitude of mind, long trained to this, enabled her to do so. She had always expected the truth to appear. She was schooled to anticipate disaster sooner or later. Now it fell as a bolt from the blue, without warning, or premonition, as she knew that it would fall. Thus it was bound to come, when it did come.

In ten minutes the fact seemed familiar knowledge. She considered the immediate situation. Her husband, Wargrave Mortimer, would not approach her; but he might go to “Colneside” with Parkyn Ambrose to see Peter Mistley. Or Ambrose might break it to Mistley alone. Probably Mistley would not believe it and return at once to her.

Within ten minutes of that thought, Aveline had left her home. She decided not to go far off, but to put herself beyond Peter’s reach for at least four-and-twenty hours.

She had not thought much yet, but knew that she could always think best on paper. She went down to Hythe therefore, and, at a sailors’ inn beside the river, wrote to Mistley. Her only concern was with him. Her husband, now that he was in a position to do so, would divorce her;

but for the present she refused to consider what action Peter would take. As her letter proceeded, however, she was called to face the outraged man who believed himself her husband, and the extent of the thing she had done unfolded itself before her. Darkness fell upon Aveline long before she had completed her confession.

Thus she wrote —

“MY DEAR PETER,

“I know you will read this. I can write it better than I can tell it, and, of course, I can't stop in your home any more till you have the whole story. I've done an unspeakable thing, and I don't know in the least yet how I'm going to feel about it; but by the time I've finished this letter, I shall begin to feel, and after I've put down all the past and dug up the details for you, I shall perhaps guess a little how you'll feel, too.

“One thing I'm not going to do, and that is excuse myself. I never will, Peter. I'm bitterly sorry for the result of what I did; but if I live to be a hundred, or if I drown myself in a few hours, I shall never be sorry for the thing itself. I've passed that stage ages ago.

“My maiden name was Mary Houston, and I married Wargrave Mortimer while my widowed mother was still alive. I married him for one reason, to help my mother die in peace, knowing that her only child would be well provided for and beyond all reach of difficulty and anxiety. As though difficulty and anxiety in themselves were evils. Mortimer was an old friend of my father, who admired him, ‘because he had an old head on young shoulders.’ And I honestly thought I loved Wargrave. I did — for all his goodness to my feckless father — and as I was threatened with penury when my mother should die, and had no near relations and none who might be expected to feel a spark of interest in a pauper orphan of twenty, it all pointed to Wargrave. I admired his probity and honour and his loyalty to my father (for whom, of course,

he felt not even respect), and when he made his sedate approach I was exceedingly flattered and, with the ignorance of a virgin mind, believed that I adored him.

“For some time we were what I thought was contented, in a twilight sort of way. Then I grew to womanhood and found Wargrave older than his age, and bound in misery and iron under every sort of social convention my soul abhorred. Disparity of temperament grew with every breath I breathed, and misunderstandings and sharp differences of opinion came between us. He resented me thinking for myself; he felt it improper that I should disagree with him. When I told him I hated opinions and only loved ideas, he sent for the doctor to see me and, I believe, thought of consulting an alienist. But our first quarrels were healed, and by the time Mary Mortimer was two-and-twenty it looked as though her husband was going to win.

“He did not, however. He had the defects of his qualities, as we all have, I suppose, and those defects of narrowness, censoriousness, complacency and lack of sympathy with the limitations, or aspirations, of other people, went with just the qualities that made him a slow poison for me. I had no confidante; I was alone in the world, and his friends sided with him, were sorry for him, had no instinct for art or liberty, and thought me a difficult and obstinate idiot.

“I’ve told you most of this before, Peter. In fact, I told you nothing that was not true about my husband except the fact that he was alive. To me he was so utterly dead after six months in Colchester, that it seemed impossible to imagine him in the land of the living; but once Mr. Seabrook spoke of Wargrave Mortimer to you, when I was in the studio, and I went out with a shudder down my spine and saw his ghost standing among the alpine frames. This isn’t flippant: it’s the truth. His name carelessly uttered by another person seemed to bring him

back from the dead. By that time, of course, I loved you. But I'll come to that.

"When I was twenty-three, I decided to run away from my husband, and obliterate my personality and start being an absolutely different woman under a new name. I amused myself all last winter in plotting the details. Everything made it easy. I had no relations who knew me, but I invented a friend. I created this friend in London, and at a moment when Wargrave Mortimer was also going from home, to see some gardens and attend a meeting of antiquaries, I said that I meant to visit my London friend. He objected mildly and suggested I should go with him; but I declined, and begged for the fortnight in London — to see pictures and hear some music. I talked him into believing it would really be a good thing for both of us. It was further understood that we should not write to each other during the separation, but return with sheaves of new experiences. I even pressed for a month apart; but this he refused: he could not leave his garden for so long.

"I had, then, a clear fortnight to vanish into the void; and I believed that would be long enough. The thought of this adventure made me so amazingly happy that it quite astonished me, and I began to understand myself, and to see that change and incident and mental distractions were vital to my nature and health of mind. Liberty seemed the only word in the language worth speaking; and I always felt it was, until I met you. Then I found what was better.

"I held a few shares in stocks, that were left to me by my mother. They only produced a wretched little twelve pounds every year; but I sold them, without telling my husband, and, as a result, had the glory of possessing two hundred and twenty-one pounds all at once. This seemed boundless riches. With that sum I went to London and hurried on with my plot. I bought mourning, and four

days later came to Colchester, as a young widow. I chose the name of 'Aveline,' because I had seen it in a poem and loved it, and the name of Brown, because it was a very common name and inconspicuous. I chose Colchester for no earthly reason except that I had seen it on scores of flower catalogues from 'Colneside,' and because it was about as far from Shropshire as I could get. I had meant to stop there a little while and later on drift over to France or Italy if I could do any good with my pictures. I came detached from the whole world to begin a brand new life and, if possible, live by art. Then I fell in love with you, and an act that would have been impossible, while still the aura of Wargrave Mortimer floated about me and the old values persisted, began to be gradually possible. Things happened; I heard ideas spoken; I began to see that to be married and to be wedded are two different states. My mind enlarged and, of course, you helped vitally to enlarge it. I said to myself, 'You're married and so you can't marry again; but you never have been wedded, and why should the one dismal fact prevent you from making the other joyful experiment?'

"Of course, this was muddled thinking you'll say; and I ought, no doubt, to have considered all the possibilities and social horrors of such a pretence. And I ought to have given you a chance and not deceived you; but from much you said I believed ——

"No, I won't go into that, Peter. It's no good trying to explain what I did. I hung on your words and opinions at that time, and you contradicted yourself, as everybody does; and sometimes you were so humane in your views about marriage that I had it on the tip of my tongue to tell you; and sometimes you were not, but took rather a severe standpoint and believed in discipline and self-control, and our duty to society and the need for personal suffering and so on. And then I thanked goodness I hadn't told you.

"You may think it was difficult to have deceived you so

completely; but it wasn't, because I had first deceived myself. I'd made believe so perfectly that Wargrave Mortimer was just as dead to me as though I'd stood by his grave. I had. I could have told you the names on the wreaths. And what was still more profound, was the feeling that Mary Houston was dead, too. You must use all your imagination to grasp that, Peter. You must believe that my old self was as dead as last year's flowers. It wasn't Mary Mortimer you married — not this man's wife, and not Mary Houston either — but another woman altogether.

"Don't let facts bother you. Of course there are the facts still — just the wretched, lifeless verities of the situation. And you ought to have known them; but the fear of loss was too frightful. You see I couldn't hurt you by not telling you — not really — not inside. It wouldn't have made me different if I had told you. We've been gloriously happy together, and the facts can't prevent that. But if you had known them, perhaps they would have prevented it and all that priceless happiness would have been lost. The facts didn't hurt me; but then I'd weighed them and found out how worthless they were; and even when I knew, down in the bottom of my consciousness somehow, that, such as they were, the facts would some day or other come to light, I didn't care. I often meant to tell you; and now, of course, I know it's a disaster that I didn't, because the truth must for ever look different to you from what it does to me. But, if you'd known the truth as long as I have, you'd feel the same contempt for it as I do. And, of course, the question now is, what effect is the truth going to have on you.

"You must think entirely for yourself and not of me. I wouldn't influence you even if I could. At least, I don't think I would, at this minute. There's a queer quality of impassivity in me, Peter, as well as my terrific power to feel and enjoy. Artists are like that. There's nobody can be so bitterly hard as a sentimentalist. It belongs to

the head, not the heart. I've buried my heart for the minute. It's under the water lilies in the mud at 'Colneside,' I think. I can get on without it, and if you turn me down, I shan't want it again. And, if you turn me down, I shall never lose my wedded life with you, or let the ugly future soil, by even a shadow, the beautiful past. I'll write you my direction when I decide upon it, in twenty-four hours. Anyway, I don't know how much this is going to hurt me yet, because I don't know how much it is going to hurt you.

“AVELINE.”

Thus she wrote, and, despite her resolute words, ended her letter in very profound gloom. She knew, for all her expressed doubt, exactly how much it was going to hurt him. She knew it so well, that she felt very small hope that he would forgive her, or condone the insult which she had offered a proud man.

She wrote also to Helena Ambrose, but only a line to thank her for the warning.

Then she posted the letters, and felt that as her first interesting moments at Colchester had been spent at the Hythe, so would her last hours in the place be spent. “I began my life by this river and I'm ending it here,” she thought. Suddenly she determined to take the train and go to Brightlingsea. She felt no desire to hide, or run very far, but was conscious of the need to get out of Peter's way and leave him free to consider her letter and proceed as he thought best. She determined, therefore, to visit Nancy Mushet, and ask to be taken in for a night or two. Failing that, she could go to an inn.

She was stunned, but not crushed. As yet she had by no means grasped the situation, or the force of its impact upon Peter Mistle.

Aveline had never been in the least attracted by women's movements or women's politics; abstract justice she never craved, and no ambition to be insurgent or assertive had tempted her. General principles had not inspired her at

any time in her life, and no desire to be in the van of feminine progress ever kindled in her mind. She wanted to be nothing but herself. She had acted purely on the impulse of a driving power to get happiness at any cost. She knew where her strength lay, and, with married life, soon found that her good points were utterly thrown away upon her husband, while her weak ones were acutely perceived by him. Where she did excel, he missed everything; where she was lacking, he had been quick to point the failure. Therefore, with that resolution and courage, most marked in those held back by no inherited caution or instructed conscience, Aveline had thrown over home and husband and struck out, full of curiosity and interest, but without fear. And she had found that every hour away from Wargrave Mortimer improved her spirits and her self-respect. Daily it grew upon her to appreciate how wisely she had acted. Not a shadow of remorse clouded the situation, because she knew that Mortimer, on his more subdued plane of feeling, must be experiencing her own comfortable emotions of self-respect restored, and appreciating the distinction of freedom — its cleanliness, hygiene, sanity.

Well she knew that duty would prompt him to a thorough search, that he would leave no stone unturned and proceed upon the impulse of a remorseless conscience, long hypertrophied by inordinate use.

Time passed and the dread of being discovered gradually began to lull. Yet a sort of subconscious intuition always lurked in her mind that the truth would appear.

"I've had to vanish from a man before; now I've got to vanish from a man again," she thought. But worlds separated the two occasions. Every rational instinct applauded her first exodus, and she was conscious that not a sane, unprejudiced being in the world could have done less than commend her courage and applaud her purpose; but Mistle was a very different matter. To deceive such a man and hoodwink him in a vital particular, rather than

run the risk of losing him, now appeared to be an action that nothing but success could have justified even to Aveline's own nebulous theories of right. She had failed, and until she set her wits to work and analysed the situation from a standpoint outside right and wrong, until she brought the values of a sentient creature, non-human, to weigh the full significance of her achievement, she suffered remorse and the unfamiliar burning torment of shame. Such emotions were unutterably loathsome to her and she fled from them thankfully along such a path of reasoning as might be pursued by a faun, or other mythic being, possessed of mind, but inspired by no code more moral than the lore of holt and den, with woe only for the vanquished and success the sole criterion. So seen, the situation saddened, but did not torment her.

Of one thing she was assured. She must keep out of Mistley's sight for the present. Mortimer she would not see in any case; but whether she would ever stand before Peter again depended not upon herself, but him. For the time being she was far too excited to weigh what loss of Mistley must mean to body and soul. She knew that to lose him was to lose everything; but that could not be helped, or hindered by her. She had acted too extravagantly, had put the man into too false and outrageous a position to feel much hope that his wounds would ever heal. The more she considered his character, the more convinced she became that he would forgive her, and try to forget her.

To Brightlingsea she went, and surprised Nancy Mushet with her petition for a bed.

"I want to study the winter dawns over the sea," she said, "and I'd sooner far come to you than go to an hotel, if you can take me in."

She was doing a kindness unwittingly, for Aveline's visit helped to distract the mother's mind from her recent loss. Mrs. Mushet agreed to the proposal, and it was not until later, when Samuel returned from work, that Aveline learned how Teddy had fallen.

Her instinct was to leave the sad pair ; but Nancy would not suffer her to do so.

"You're an understanding creature, Mrs. Mistley, and you'll feel for us," she said. "And because I can speak little, don't think I feel little. I'm worn out. I know my loss, but master hasn't quite grasped it yet. A mother feels it pang all through her like lightning; with a father it moves slower."

"Before it happened," said Samuel, pointing at his wife, "she used to cry out against the war and say shrill things to them that would listen; now she's dumb. The bird shrieks out when it sees the robber come to the nest; but after, when the stroke has fallen and the nest is empty, then all's silent."

"Everything's changed," sighed Nancy, "for you naturally build the future on the foundations of your children. And a time comes when you pretty well look at everything through your children, or your child, as we did; and then, when the precious life is snatched away, all your plans and contrivances and hopes and little plots — they're all done for."

"I can very well understand that," said Aveline.

"He didn't seek great things — only to be useful and good," murmured the father.

The visitor found herself in harmony with sorrow. She sympathised and brought her gift of imagination to lighten their grief. She threw her mind into this, and for a time succeeded in putting her own ruined life behind her; but when she went to bed, turned and tossed in unfamiliar surroundings and reflected what twelve hours had brought, she began to esteem the size of the disaster.

Then she set herself to diminish its bulk by taking thought, but only lessened her sense of wrong-doing without decreasing the eclipse of happiness that awaited her. It was the loss of all happiness that numbed her — that and the thought of the grief of Peter Mistley. She saw him lying awake, too.

CHAPTER XXX

THE VISIT TO WILLIAM

THROUGH the hours of night Aveline's mind ran riot. For a time she fancied herself a creature hunted by remorseless beings, pictured herself driven out of the gardens of happiness, as Eve from Eden. Then she laughed at herself. No heroine was she — no Eve, the tragic victim of destiny. Not archangels with flaming swords had driven her out of the home she had won, nor was she the plaything of wanton gods. She could thank none but herself for the position she now occupied, and as for the men involved, she had treated both as badly as possible. But to regard either as a remorseless being intent on her destruction, Aveline knew to be ridiculous. And her soul could create no Furies.

Wargrave Mortimer had been patience personified. Such complete failure to understand her must have irritated most men to madness, and taken shape, perhaps, of cruelty; but he was never angry with her or himself. Aveline wondered how he had been able to explain the facts to Mrs. Ambrose on recovering from his faint. But then she recollected his old sensitiveness — that their differences should be concealed from every eye — must have been largely modified when she ran away. That was not a circumstance he could possibly keep secret, and his world naturally knew the fact of her disappearance. How far her flight had altered her husband she could not tell; but nothing would alter his faultless punctilio, studied courtesy and self-control. It was his faultlessness that had made him impossible to live with. She had left him for his kindness, not his cruelty; for his patience, not his tem-

per; for his obstinate resolution never to sink to her level. It was the unchanging crepuscule of his attitude that made her fly to seek sunshine or storm, love or hate — anything rather than the uneventful twilight in which he moved as complacently as an owl. To be worshipped and scolded she could have understood, but not to be tolerated in all her moods, and made hourly conscious of the gulf that separated her from her husband.

Moreover, she knew, better than he did, what an awful strain she put upon him, and what renewed health of spirit must have returned to him when the tension was relaxed. He certainly would neither be cruel, nor remorseless. He would forgive her and then divorce her — if his religious opinions permitted him to do so.

That brought her to Peter. Fate had flung her from one self-contained and self-respecting man to another. But a universe separated them. She had tried to modify the outlook of Mortimer and failed, and although she and Mistle were very near together and loved each other, she could not say that they saw entirely alike. He was a man of deep feeling and sublime devotion — quite prepared to give all, but only in exchange for all. His love, so she assured herself, was love of a quality that, under certain circumstances, might turn to hate. It could not stand still; it could not preserve a passionless equilibrium. Until the moment of the catastrophe it had steadily grown, but rationally and sanely grown. He wanted her more and more, felt more and more that she was the complement of his being, the first joy and interest of his life; but he never erred in the opposite direction from Mortimer; he was never uxorious, or silly, or dependent upon her for any addition to his existence not fairly in a wife's gift. She had always respected him and known that he was more to her than she could be to him.

She had studied him with flashes of intuition and made discoveries. As many another woman, she had found that a man's opinions harden after marriage if the marriage is

successful, and loosen if it be a failure. She had hoped and expected that his exceedingly tolerant and charitable attitude to sex relations would expand after marriage until it might be possible, at some future date, to tell him the truth without fear of destruction; but the reverse had happened. Firm in his own experience of a marriage relation more perfect than his fondest dream, Mistley had found his respect for the institution increase. He had, in fact, grown more conventional, and more impressed with the opinion that was oftener crowned with success than he had been led to suppose.

Yet he, too, would be reasonable. He would remember many things that she had said, and her unconcealed dislike of the marriage bond.

"In fact," thought Aveline, "they are birds of a feather in some ways, though so radically different, and they will flock together, and go through with it, and discuss the catastrophe like gentlemen. They will spare me, for neither could bully a woman. They will leave me to the last; and when they've decided what they are going to do about it, they will write to me."

She was not flying from them: she was flying from herself. She had flown from the self created by Mortimer; and now she must fly from the self created by Mistley. The remorseless and pitiless ones, by all rule of morals and right tragedy, should lie in Aveline's own bosom. She sought them and failed to find them. She suffered, however, and strove to discover wherein the suffering lay.

She learned that what hurt her vitally could only hurt as long as she allowed it to do so. The sense of loss and temporal disaster, the destruction of a precious home, and the fact that the man who had taught her to love was probably for ever lost — these thoughts awakened suffering enough; but there was a deeper discomfort and darkness behind the temporal pain and grief. If she allowed this discomfort and darkness to conquer her, then, said she to herself, "I am done for. But I won't — I won't — for if

I'm going to do that, I may as well throw up the sponge and kill myself. The question is whether what's left after the crash is worth keeping; and that entirely depends on how I look on what I've done."

If she were to confess crime, then all was over, and what spiritual life lay before her would not be worth living. The sequel to admission of guilt could only be along the road of remorse, followed by expiation, self-sacrifice, atonement and a cheerless end, lightened by religious assurances that ultimate peace with her Maker might be regarded as reasonably assured. She shuddered at such a picture. It was out of harmony with her temperament and convictions. She reasoned rather that only chance had wrecked her, and that, if her good fortune had held, she would never have suffered a qualm.

"It may be below good and evil, or it may be above good and evil, but that's how I'm going to look at it," she thought, "because it's madness for a person like me to think of it in any other way. What I have done was the same last week, when I was the happiest woman in England, as it is to-night. So, if I'm ashamed to-night of what I did, though I was never ashamed before, then I'm a coward. And I'm not built to be a coward, whatever else I am."

She judged herself sternly, however, and ignored the long struggles sustained before she deceived Peter; she also put away the past temptations to confess, and the flitting throbs, never wholly absent from her heart, after their false wedding. But knowing these trifles only obscured the issue now, she dismissed them and tried to bring the problem to principles. To whine about having done wrong, would be just as feeble as to whine about good luck suddenly turned to bad. She was the same woman to-night as the day before, neither better nor worse, and what she had to bring herself to own was, not sorrow for what she had done, but sorrow that it had been found out. Because discovery must make the man she loved unutterably

miserable. That was certain. He was too logical to feel any personal disgrace, or nonsense of that sort; but he was too human and too proud not to suffer very bitterly from the fact of her deceit. He would argue that a love capable of stooping so low, could not be the fine emotion he had conceived as representing Aveline's attitude to him. There lay the peril that was going to wreck the future. Her distrust of him would be the unforgivable thing. She knew his character well enough to be sure of this. Perhaps she herself could never have loved a man weak enough to condone what she had done — what she had done out of a selfish fear that the truth would rob her of all she most desired. She had been a coward, though she had just assured herself she could never be that.

As her mind began to tire, it weakened and told her falsehoods. She said to herself that Mistley had made her — created her as completely as he had created his gardens. But this pretence her intellect scorned.

"If he had," she thought, "I shouldn't be in this fix to-day. It was the vital spark in myself that I never showed him, and never yielded to him when I yielded all the rest — it was just the evasive, unmoral, callous thing that is the intrinsic ME — that has done for me now."

From abstractions her mind, grown very weary, descended to concrete details, trivial and futile. She wondered if Mortimer and Mistley would shake hands when they met. Even lesser trifles obtruded to annoy her at their jarring impropriety. She was like one mourning beside a grave, who suddenly laughs at the incongruous behaviour of a stray cat. Her mind played the fool with her.

If Aveline slept at all, it was after the late dawn had broken, and she expressed contrition to Nancy Mushet on descending from her room at ten o'clock next day.

"You'll never see the sun rise at that rate, Mrs. Mistley."

"I slept badly, but not because I wasn't comfortable. I'm in trouble. It'll straighten itself out all right. Things look worse in the dark."

"I heard what may interest you, just now," said Mrs. Mushet. "That poor creature, William Ambrose ——"

"Not dead?"

"No, but worse. Tom Darcy called for my husband this morning on the way to the Hard. William's going pretty fast, he thinks."

"Poor Emma!"

"Yes, she'll feel it for a time. Tom hopes that, when he's gone, she may change her ways and become a respectable woman."

"Nothing like misery to make people respectable, Mrs. Mushet. I think I'll go and see Emma. I like her — she's a good sort."

Aveline had still withheld her direction from those who might desire to know it; but she wrote to Peter Mistley now, and explained that any letters would reach her at Samuel Mushet's home.

She visited Emma and found her in distress.

William was getting weaker fast, and the veil began to thicken between him and the living. Little by little it grew denser, and Emma knew that he would soon be cut off from her. She struggled to get back to him, as all struggle to get back to the dying they love; but invisible hands came between. Moreover, William's interest had dwindled to a point, and that she did not understand. Grief was increased by fears, for though his mind was clear by day, at night, while he suffered most and passed from restless waking to restless sleep, he shouted sometimes, murmured threats, and laughed at coming events that revealed themselves in the wild scenery of his dreams.

"There's things hidden," declared Emma. "He got quiet yesterday and called for a pencil and paper and made up some verses. Once or twice I've known him to make rhymes before. The cleverness of that man; and

now he's on the edge of his grave and full of secrets — secrets from me!"

"I expect it's only because he's so ill," said Aveline. "He has no secrets really — only fancies them."

"He's got his knife into Gord now," declared the mournful woman. "He makes my flesh creep; and yet there's sense in it. For it's no good His calling Himself a Gord of love if He don't show it. Everybody keeps shouting out He's a Gord of love — to keep their own silly spirits up against the war, I reckon. But 'andsome is as 'andsome does, 'Grey Eyes.' My heart's breaking, and what's the good of Gord's love to me if He's going to wipe out William? We're told to let men see our good works, not hear about 'em. Well, why don't Gord let me see a bit of His love?"

"I don't know," said Aveline. "Oh, Emma, I'm in an awful fix myself."

A sudden impulse overmastered her to tell Emma Darcy what she had done and where she stood. Then William hammered on the floor over their heads and Emma ran up to him.

A moment later Aveline was called to come up, and she ascended and stood beside the bed of the sick man.

Earth, impatient to win back this scrap of itself and restore it to sweet and wholesome matter, extended its substance over the perishing creature, obliterated what was greater than earth and left him all clod. But the fires of mind still burned subdued. Indeed, his brain proved singularly clear and his speech coherent and lucid. He was at his best. Aveline told them about herself almost recklessly and in sudden, senseless hunger for sympathy. For a moment even Emma forgot her own sorrows and grew round-eyed at the revelation. William grinned quietly.

"You're one of us," he said. "I always knew you were."

He cut to the root of the thing.

"You're a bigamist. You've broke the law of the

land. They can lock you up for years if they like. A good sporting run for your money — eh? Hard luck, though. You loved him and he loved you — the real thing on both sides, if Chance had only let you both alone. Is he going to let 'em lock you up?"

"I never thought of that," said Aveline.

Billy chuckled.

"And yet, come to think of it, you did basely, young 'Grey Eyes.' It weren't love — not the high sort of love of the Code. Did you ever hear of the Code — the thirty-one articles? I dare say not. But there was such a thing. And the first article says that the accident of marriage is no plea against love. So you're all right so far. But then there's another commandment, that you oughtn't to love where you can't ask in marriage. The Code, of course, means the man, but it holds for the woman, too, if she's going to take the bit in her teeth and make the running, same as you have. You couldn't marry him, so you shouldn't have loved him — see?"

"I didn't want to marry him, I wanted to wed him," she answered. "You told me the difference."

"And you ought to have told him. You ought to have found out whether he could rise to your heights — whether he was worthy to belong to our tribe of people."

"You will soon find out," said Emma.

"Not now," explained William. "He can't feel the same now. He can never feel the same to her again, because she didn't trust him. She diddled him into marrying her, and he'll feel a damned fool; and that's the hardest thing of all to forgive from a man to a woman."

Emma was sanguine.

"The man ain't born that wouldn't forgive her blessed eyes," she said.

"All depends what your love's built up on," answered William. "The first chap was nought to her, body or soul. The second chap was all right. But only soul is lasting. I know that — now my body's gone. Most

women think the only thing is to give their bodies, and that's the highest masterpiece of love. But the knowing sort very well understand their bodies are the least precious of all their goods. A clever woman often feels glad that a man can be so easily satisfied. She knows that a man who holds her flesh the precious thing isn't the type never to tire of her. But the other sort of friendship is better worth while, and always worth while. The soul friendship, I mean. Always worth while — when a woman's got a soul. So many haven't. That's where Emma and me score."

"That's all very fine," said Aveline, "but you can't separate a woman's soul from her body like that, William. Can you, Emma? It sounds all right, but it isn't true. A man may sneer at his body when he's tired of it, because a man's soul and his body are always two different things; but a woman's soul and body are not — never."

"We're interested in our bodies, if we're proper women, to our dying day," confessed Emma. "Yes, if it's only to pity 'em, and cry over 'em and remember what they was like once."

William showed interest.

"If you both say so, it may be true," he admitted. "A man don't bother about his skin and bones after a certain time. He only wants to keep one inside t'other as long as life's worth while. And there's lots of women different from you two. You're built of much the same clay. When I'm dead, 'Grey Eyes,' and Emma's left on her lonesome, you can keep friends with her."

"I will," said Aveline; "whatever happens, I'll be Emma's friend as long as I live."

"And I'll be yours," promised Emma.

"You won't have much of a time," prophesied William. "You're built on a pattern that never does have much of a time; still, you can be pals and cuss the world together. You've got the craft and Emma has got the sense, so you might help one another along."

CHAPTER XXXI

THE POINT OF VIEW

PARKYN AMBROSE arrived unusually early at "Colneside" on the morning following Mr. Mortimer's discovery. He was very grave, for he found himself confronted with a most painful task. There could be no shadow of doubt that Wargrave Mortimer was not mistaken. He had desired to see Peter Mistley at once, and proposed doing so, but Ambrose begged for time. It was arranged, therefore, that Parkyn would break the truth to Peter and invite him to meet Mortimer afterwards. When Mistley answered his master's summons, he found him in his private office alone, and the first thing he did was to shake hands.

Then he made him sit down.

"I am faced with a very terrible task, Mistley," he said. "It is my duty to break to you some appalling news. I am bound to say no word can be too strong for it, and if I did not know you were a man of great strength of character and also physically powerful, I could not trust myself to do it. You have to suffer a terrible shock — a thing almost beyond belief. And I have undertaken the task of bringing you this dreadful news, because I felt, as a friend and one who honours and respects you, that none could do it with more feeling."

Peter stared.

"I am, of course, assuming you are wholly ignorant of the facts — have no suspicion of them; but my unfortunate guest, Mr. Wargrave Mortimer, doubts this. He believes it impossible you cannot know. Do you associate the name of Wargrave Mortimer with Mrs. Mistley?"

"The client who came to see the studios? Of course not, Mr. Ambrose."

"You never heard anything of an unconventional or egregious character concerning Mrs. Mistley's situation in the world before you married her?"

Mistley flushed.

"What are you saying — what are you saying? Who is this man and what does he dare to suggest about my wife?"

"I was right," answered the other, "and I knew that I must be right. But that makes my task the more painful — far more painful. Brace yourself, my dear fellow. The lady you believe to be your wife is not your wife. She is another man's wife — Wargrave Mortimer's wife. Last night he came across her portrait and fainted from emotion. As I remarked to Mrs. Ambrose, it must have taken a great deal of emotion to make such a self-contained man become unconscious. He furnished details of an intimate, remorseless character. The dates are all consonant also. He recognised her water-colour drawings, too, from their peculiar style. In fact, not a loop-hole of doubt exists."

Peter had turned pale. He stared at the speaker.

"I don't believe it, Mr. Ambrose. It's unthinkable. Nothing but her own words would make me believe it."

"I am bound to say it is unquestionably true. It is, however, quite right that you should not take this terrible story on my word alone. Mrs. Ambrose feels no doubt whatever. She wept half the night. Woman-like, she is not withholding her support even under these harrowing conditions. At such times logic fails and reason falters. In fact, my wife has gone so far as to say she loves the erring girl better than ever. Such loyalty is, I imagine, impossible to the male, even if it were desirable, which it is not. The safety of society rests with the male, not the female, as some thinkers erroneously imagine. Mortimer, of course, wishes to see you. His attitude is un-

friendly, because he harbours a suspicion that you knew the truth and must always have known it. Therefore he doesn't think you can be a good man, but quite the contrary. He will be at the Moot Hall at noon, and you had better go and hear what he has to say. He shows no desire to visit the lady."

"I will see my wife at once," answered Peter. "I'm sorry you should have been called to this dreadful business, and I thank you for the way you've done it. I can't say more now."

"I appreciate your fortitude," declared Mr. Ambrose. "And don't forget: the Moot Hall at twelve o'clock. Mortimer, having seen you, proceeds to London to take the necessary steps. One can realise without difficulty what he has been called to endure during the past year."

Mistley went out and hastened homeward. His reason prompted him to believe what he had heard; his experience of Aveline as wife refused to believe it. And yet, when he considered her insurgent ideas upon some subjects, her indifference to fundamental rules of what men understood by honour, and her ready inclination to question most accepted dicta, he could not deny that she might have done this thing. There was her love of him to cry out against it. That she loved him with all her heart he knew well enough. But how much did he know of her heart's composition? Little things came to his mind as he returned home: trifles that yet lent their colour to the disaster: the picture on the catalogue, her aversion from being photographed, her frank dislike of alpine plants.

He began to dread to meet Aveline: but the moment he found that she was gone, a frantic desire to see her mastered him. That she should not be there spoke more forcibly than Parkyn Ambrose of the truth. She had left no message, but on her little writing-desk was an open envelope directed to her in Helena's handwriting. He learned that Aveline had left home nearly two hours before, and doubted not that she had taken a train to London.

It was too soon to meet Wargrave Mortimer, and Peter went into his garden and walked up and down in it. The space was small, and at every fifty paces he had to turn. He tramped for an hour, then it began to rain and he went indoors to his study. The significance of what had happened steadily ground itself into him. Great upheavals made a volcanic country of his mind. He forgot what had happened in between and pictured life without Aveline. To go back again to the emptiness of his previous existence promised annihilation.

He kept his appointment and found Wargrave Mortimer waiting for him. It was a curious meeting; but they took it without any sign of outward emotion, and bowed to each other.

"If you will follow me," said Mistley, "I can bring you to a quiet eating house, where we shall be out of earshot of everybody and can talk."

"There is not much to be said between us, I imagine. I should wish to ask a few questions; but, of course, you are not bound to answer them."

"I have no secrets. At first every instinct protested. But one isn't dead to reason. I'm afraid it's true enough. I returned home to find her gone. No doubt she will write."

"Don't be too certain of that."

Presently they sat in the seclusion of a little chophouse where Mistley was known. They took a corner to themselves.

"I will ask you first if you knew the truth, or if you did not," began Mortimer. "Naturally our attitude to each other, or at any rate, my attitude to you, depends on that. I mean that if you can tell me that you did not know that Mary Mortimer was a married woman, I will believe you."

Instinctively Peter began to hate this man.

"I understood that she was a widow."

"Then I'm only less sorry for you than I am for my-

self. Whatever your feelings may have been to her, this, of course, must entirely alter them."

"You can leave my feelings out. We needn't preach to each other. The only question for me is what you design to do."

"You surprise me," answered Wargrave Mortimer, and he showed his surprise. "I should have thought my action must be obvious. But I speak hastily. Forgive me. I have to remember that you cannot yet weigh the full significance of what has happened. Therefore, though the shock of coming face to face, as it were, with this misguided woman last night was very great and completely upset my nervous control, it cannot have been worse than the shattering blow you have had this morning. You believed you had married a widow, and discovered that you have been living with a married woman. If you are a Christian, as I have no reason to doubt, then I can understand that your mind must ——"

"Nothing of that matters," said Mistley.

"In the sense that you are innocent, it doesn't matter; but you must feel it tragically. It is worse — far worse than a death. And we know that a death only filters into the mind slowly. By God's mercy the human brain is built in that way — only to take in a great trouble by inches. You don't realise yet what this appalling woman has done, or what she has called on me to suffer in the past and you to suffer in the future. I loved her devotedly, Mr. Mistley. I did everything a refined and religious man could do to make her life happy, useful and contented. But owing to faulty upbringing, her faith in religion was never well and truly grounded. I could not undo the bad work of the past — one of the bitterest discoveries to me, for I had felt sure that I could. She did not tell me that she was going to leave me, but vanished out of my life in a moment, completely and utterly. My grief and dismay were profound. I left no reasonable means untried to discover her, but failed. One clue led the

authorities to suspect that she had gone to Canada. But they were mistaken. A certain woman, who resembled Mary superficially, was traced to Ontario, but never found, though I spent much money on the search. She went out of my life for ever; but not out of my prayers. I could not tell whether she was a sinner, or the victim of some terrible circumstances beyond her power to control. Now, however, we know, too well, where we stand."

Mistley regarded the speaker with his straight stare.

"I am not in a position to say what she may have told you regarding the past," continued Mortimer, "nor need you tell me anything unless you wish to do so."

"She told me, what I doubt not was the truth in every particular save one," answered Peter. "She said, of course, that her husband was dead."

"And upon that lie lured you into a fancied union — the sacrament of marriage."

"Yes. You were only dead to her."

"I was *not* dead to her! I was far less dead to her than she was to me. Is it possible you are going to excuse her?"

"No — I am not excusing her. We must look all round it."

"For my own part, I have determined, after due consideration, to divorce my wife. Understand that I recognise no spiritual divorce. With my views and as a Christian, spiritual divorce is impossible, and I shall never marry again. But I owe it to the community and to my own social convictions to separate myself legally from this unfortunate sinner. I take it that she will pass out of your life also, having abused your life in a manner that puts her beyond the pale. No just man can condone such an unspeakable outrage with all its degrading details of untruth and immorality ——"

"Leave that. You needn't judge her."

"I am the last to judge her. And for your guidance, should you be at all concerned for her future, I may tell

you that I shall see she does not want, or be led into temptation from need. A greater than you, or I, said to a kindred woman, 'Go and sin no more.' Can we say less? Her destiny is hidden from us, or why she was permitted to cross our paths. But this much I can assure you. If she seeks to live honestly henceforth and atone, as far as possible for the past, I will take care that she suffers no temporal troubles."

He looked at his watch.

"I do not think there is more to be said. My train will leave in three-quarters of an hour. My address will be the Western Hotel for the next few days. Write there, if necessary. You have my deepest sympathy and my support. And you will spare a little from your own distress for me. I, too, have been through dark waters. By the way, I trust there are no complications? Forgive me for mentioning a subject so delicate. You know to what I allude?"

"No; nothing of that sort."

"So much the better. The future of a child brought unlawfully into the world is dark."

"In England, yes."

"We cannot go beyond, or behind, Divine law, and woe betide the nations that do."

He extended his hand, but Mistle could not take it. He bowed, and the other flushed at the slight. Then he went out and Peter saw him no more.

He was conscious of an impulse which sprang of this meeting — an instinct to champion Aveline against this just man. He felt not at all sorry for Wargrave Mortimer; nor had the stranger at all surprised him, for his wife's description of him — a portrait completed in many conversations — had been correct and not exaggerated. Peter remembered how he had been astonished sometimes that Aveline could speak so pitilessly of the dead. Now he understood. It was easy enough to forgive Aveline for leaving Mortimer: the difficulties began after that, and the

thing that tore his heart was her distrust — not of her husband, but of Mistley himself. For the moment he could not understand why she had not found his love all-powerful and worthy of complete trust.

But this aspect of the case was pointed out to him before he received Aveline's letter. For, after having seen the last of her husband, Peter, desiring speech with another man, yet aware that neither Ambrose nor any at "Colneside" could speak wisdom, bethought him of Dr. Carbonell. They had long been acquainted, for Peter's family was known to the old man, and he entertained regard for him and friendship for Aveline.

Craving for companionship, Mistley waited until Carbonell's luncheon hour had passed, perambulated in the Castle grounds until it was two o'clock, and then called at the doctor's house.

The ancient was busy, as usual. He plunged straight into conversation as he shook hands, and proceeded as though he and the visitor were already in the midst of discussion.

"Have you ever thought of Essex in Domesday?" he asked. "Of course you haven't. But I can assure you it was very different from now. Domesday Book shows that our marches had few trees — perhaps none — where our forests stand now. How to prove it? Out of Domesday itself. Our pastures were thick with sheep. Swine are not mentioned. Now swine in Domesday mean forest — always forest. They won their sustenance from the trees and the undergrowth of trees. But here are no pigs, hence no woods. Proof positive!"

"You're getting on with your book?"

"Slowly."

"I've had a Doom's day all to myself. I'm in awful trouble. I wonder if I may trespass on your time, for old times' sake? One couldn't bring the thing to anybody else in the world but you. But you're a humanist, and your outlook isn't blurred by any religious predilections.

You judge facts by themselves, not by their appearance in the light of established laws, or doctrines."

"What an iconoclast you'd make me! But the older you get, the more patient you get, Peter, and the more disposed to give credit to the general outlook, and pardon our clumsy shifts to make the world a better place. That is, speaking generally, of course. Criticism mellows as the fires abate. What I ascribe to wickedness in middle age, in old age I credit to stupidity. We are still mostly fools and therefore to be forgiven. I speak in rather a contrite mood, as a matter of fact, for only yesterday I lost my temper with a man and haven't apologised yet. But I must. A friend of Parkyn Ambrose — a most worthy person by the name of Wargrave Mortimer."

"You won't be able to say you're sorry unless you write to him. He's left Colchester."

"Has he? A chastening type of the good man — born good — a thief of virtue. Born good, but good for what? Who shall say? What did you think of him?"

"I have just left him under very peculiar circumstances."

"There is something left out of all of us, Peter, else you'd get perfect people, which is absurd. You can't have goodness without badness, and badness is the salt of life, though goodness must be the staple. For the evolution of morals is luckily upwards. At least one thought so, until we saw Germany at war in the twentieth century. It's the gift of most rogues to make friends. The right down bad man generally has friends, who will do or die for him; but not the flagrantly good man. Now go ahead. What's the matter? Here I chatter and you are in trouble."

Dr. Carbonell listened while the other told him what had happened.

"One can't say much till I hear from her," he concluded.

"Do you feel sure you will hear?"

"Yes, I'm sure of that. I know she was happy with me. You can't deceive a man over a fundamental thing like that, if he loves a woman. She's been happy even knowing what she'd done. I don't blame her for leaving him and, God knows, I don't blame her for caring for me; but if she had loved me as I thought she did, could she have done this? Could a woman really value a man and treat him so? Friendship would hesitate at such a deception, how much more love."

"There is only one sort of pure friendship," said Dr. Carbonell, who thought for some moments before speaking. "Only youth makes real friends and pours itself out in unalloyed, selfless friendship. Adult friendship has always got a pinch of dross in it — even the friendship that's magnified into love. Grown-up friendship soon withers if any strain be put upon it. Your wife is like all young things. She has the natural instinct towards happiness born in her, and, in her case, an individuality strong enough and headstrong enough to put happiness before all else. She fought with her own weapons and escaped from an environment that was destroying her. She loved you with all her heart, don't doubt that; but she could not tell what effect the truth would have had on your love for her, and that's where her weakness came in, or her feminine instinct. The deceit wouldn't have been possible to some characters: it was to hers. The woman who could run away in secret from her first husband, could also lead you to suppose you were marrying a widow. She felt that if you knew the truth she must lose you sooner or later, because, doubtless, she would have supposed that to live with you unmarried was merely sowing the wind before being called to reap the whirlwind."

Thus the old man erred in his estimate of Aveline; but the error was hidden from Mistley. The argument looked sound. He nodded.

"What follows?" asked the doctor.

"I have to look into my own heart for what follows," granted Mistley. "I have to ask myself whether, had I known the truth, I should have demanded that the truth was made known to her husband and everybody."

"Exactly. As you had offered marriage, the woman could not well have suggested free love without running a pretty fair risk of losing you altogether. We have hardly reached that social stage yet. And if she had told you the truth, you could not have married her till all was known and you had enabled her husband to divorce her according to the law's disgusting requirements. Of course altering her name was nothing. That wouldn't have invalidated the marriage. You marry a woman, not a name. The law looks for the individual. Why, her handwriting, or the print of her thumb, is far more important than her name, and rightly so. We exalt mere names, as though they were essentials of organism. She trusted to luck, and the luck failed. It comes back to the bed-rock question whether she could have won you in any other way. Of course there were far more important things to consider than winning you. But, with her peculiar bent of mind and will to happiness, she wouldn't see anything more important than winning you. I don't excuse her, because she knew that your happiness depended upon it, and did what her conscience, however educated, must have told her was wrong. And yet, perhaps, that's not fair to her either, since we don't know how her conscience was educated."

"Her father was weak, I fancy — evidently a muddler in money matters and a foggy thinker altogether."

"That you might expect."

"But her mother was different. She liked her father better than her mother."

"You will hear from her, you say. Well, let it go until you hear. It's a shattering thing and I'm awfully sorry. But keep your nerve, though there's no need to tell you to

do that. It's honestly impossible to judge a human character and doubtfully just to blame anybody. We are too complex and too much at the mercy of our ancestors. We're just beginning dimly to realise how difficult it is to allocate responsibility — difficult and increasingly dangerous. For the strain of life tightens on each successive generation, and at present we are bound about by outworn laws that become increasingly unfitted to control us. Outworn creeds die the death and outworn laws should do the same. To-day we are under the heels of the lawyers, who have the best possible reason for leaving the law alone. But they must move presently. Pessimists say man unlearns as fast as he learns, and that none of his conquests are held so strongly that he can be certain of not losing them. That's nonsense. Evolution doesn't go back — not even the evolution of morals. It's certain that a thousand of the regulations of dead men are unseemly and indecent to-day, and do not meet our needs and self-respect. But it's also certain that man's a conservative by nature, and those whose ancestors made the laws — those who still find they don't pinch — hang back and only move on compulsion from those who are pinched. It's time the State had a spring cleaning, and I hope the Church and the Law will get a scrub, too. They need it. Perhaps, after the war we shall speed the social machine, if Labour's contented with anything less than a revolution. Good-bye for the moment. Well, you know I am ready and willing to help you, if it's in my power. Where is ——?”

“I don't know yet. I hope she'll tell me when she writes.”

“She'll leave the future to you, I fancy. Has she friends who are likely to influence her?”

“Mrs. Ambrose is fond of her, and, of course, knows about it.”

“At least a charitable woman, though whether her charity arises from affectation, self-interest, or conviction, I can't say. Probably a blend, as in most cases.”

They parted at Carbonell's front door and Peter Mistley went home.

He did not expect to hear from Aveline until the following morning; but her letter, written at the Hythe, reached him by a late post that night.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE REVOLVER

GEOFFREY SEABROOK conducted the master achievement of his life with all his energies and spared nothing, since upon success depended his future. The position was curious, because at first he continually found himself calculating without the necessary premise. It seemed not strange that he should sometimes forget it; but the condition for which he worked and the end he designed demanded to be kept in sight: otherwise it was impossible to proceed to the best advantage. He had to grasp the fact that fruition meant two men dead, who were still in the flesh. One, indeed, neared his natural end very fast, but the other was in full strength and vigour, with the affairs of life at flood and no hint or suspicion of the fate lying in store for him. And the mechanical operation of Seabrook's mind tended to make him forget that on a day, now swiftly drawing near, Parkyn Ambrose would be dead, with all the interests that he controlled at the mercy of his fellow-men. There was danger to the last, and until the moment when Ambrose entered his brother's death-chamber there could be no abandonment of Seabrook's attitude.

Now he sought his employer for an interview. He did not fear the issue, since Helena had already sounded her husband on the subject; but Ambrose knew not the days of his brother's life were running out so swiftly.

Geoffrey Seabrook, therefore, begged for some words, and Parkyn listened.

"I don't know whether I'm not taking a liberty," began

the draughtsman. "If I am, please stop me at once, sir, for it is the last thing I should dare to do."

"I have no fear on that score."

"I do feel fear, because I refer to other affairs than my own — sacred affairs, in a manner of speaking. A long time ago now I met Mr. William Ambrose and Miss Darcy. And a few days ago I met Emma Darcy again, and to my surprise she stopped me. She was not begging, and seemed in very great distress. She asked me to give you a message, and I said, of course, that such a thing would be improper, and that she should try and get permission to come before you herself. But nothing would convince her that you would allow her to speak to you. Upon that subject, of course, I could not speak. She then begged me again to take a message, and I answered that it depended upon what the message might be. She spoke, and I found that she referred to Mr. William Ambrose. She fears he cannot live very much longer. She told me that he had greatly changed, and was most anxious to do what he could to atone for the past. I begged her not to go into anything that did not concern me. I kept her to the point. Mr. William has seen a clergyman, and the clergyman found him anxious to make peace with the world, and before all else with you. The clergyman was to write, and when Emma Darcy told me that, I said that nothing more need be done. However, she urged me so strongly, and seemed to think it so doubtful that you would forgive Mr. William sufficiently to see him again, that I had to promise to mention it. But I hope you will not feel I have taken too much upon myself in repeating what the poor creature said. I could not choose but pity her."

"You exercised your usual tact, Seabrook. I am bound to say you were right. As a matter of fact I am going to Brightlingsea to take leave of my unhappy brother and assure him of my forgiveness. I am very glad to do so. I had decided before receiving the clergy-

man's letter. I go down on Thursday afternoon, at four of the clock."

"Then I need do nothing more?"

"Nothing whatever, thank you, except to keep the circumstances private. A man of your good feeling will not need to be told what the life of my brother has been to me; and knowing me, you do not need to be told that I have done all an elder brother could do to retrieve the position. However, I failed. Isn't it true, by the way, that Mrs. Mistley — so to call her — is at Brightlingsea? I could not ask your colleague, but understood from Mushet that she was there."

"Yes, she is there. Mrs. Ambrose told me so yesterday, when she called here and just missed you. I think Mrs. Ambrose was going to see her."

Parkyn frowned.

"I trust not. I cannot believe that would be wise. However, that is no problem for you. I'm bound to say this unfortunate affair has caused me very great pain on Mr. Mistley's account. By God's will the imposition was brought to light in my home. One can only be heartily sorry for all those involved."

"A terrible thing. I should never have thought a woman could live with such a secret."

"Her duplicity is no doubt astounding. It argues something quite unfinished and primitive, the callousness of a savage. And all concealed under culture and feminine charm."

"I used to feel, somehow, there was more about her than met the eye," ventured Seabrook. "I remember, before his engagement was announced, telling Mistley I believed that from a sort of furtive and suspicious air that she might be hiding something. Of course, afterwards, I felt very sorry I had said so."

"No doubt you were right," answered Ambrose. "When at Brightlingsea, I may possibly visit her, but only if Mistley wishes it."

Then he left the draughtsman and Geoffrey proceeded with his work. It was clear that William had made assurance doubly sure by seeking a clergyman and advertising his reformation. Two days only remained before Parkyn's visit to Brightlingsea, and during that time one thing called to be done.

That day, unknown to her husband, Helena had gone down to see Aveline; but Geoffrey knew this, and did not desire to meet Helena again or have any more to do with her until all was over. He intended to keep every shadow of the truth from Parkyn's wife, and the story that she would presently hear was the same that the world would hear, when the brothers were no more. That he, Geoffrey, had taken any hand in the death of her husband was, of course, a fact to be hidden from Helena as from everybody else. He had planned all details. Inevitably he must suffer from inquiry and bear the blaze of investigation upon one aspect of the coming deed; but he had thought his way out and made his story strong at every point. Free of all question he could not go, but the responsibility he was prepared to take involved him in no crime, and did not threaten his liberty. Many might even applaud him, when his part came to be learned according to his own explanation of it.

This crucial matter formed the subject of speech between William Ambrose and Geoffrey on the evening of the same day; for Seabrook went down that night and with him took a vital item in the machine of Parkyn Ambrose's destruction.

William was now grown weak and his interests had narrowed. His mind continued clear, however, and since he knew nearly all that Seabrook could tell him, he was only concerned with what the other had brought. When Emma left them she uttered a protest.

"It's always the same when you come," she said to Geoffrey. "I'm fired out; and it's a shame, because I know you've got secrets with William away from me.

And he never had a secret from me before you came sneaking down here."

The sick man's voice was sunk to a whisper now, for his disease was in his throat.

"Don't you worry," he said. "There's no secrets you won't know in good time. What's hid is only for your own good, and two days from now you'll understand."

She left them; and when she had gone, Seabrook shut the door and sunk his own voice, so that what followed was spoken almost soundlessly.

"Have you got it?" asked Billy, and the other brought a small parcel from his pocket.

"It's light," he said, "but the charge is heavy. You'll only need to fire once, but all the barrels can be loaded."

He produced a little revolver which the sick man fingered, and found he had strength to raise easily.

"You know he's coming on Thursday, at four o'clock. Have you thought where you are going to hide this from Emma?"

"In the mattress. I've made a hole under me that she don't know about. Did it last night. When the time comes, I'll have it hid under the bedclothes. Where's the cartridges?"

"In my pocket. I'll leave them with you — five. Can you load it, or shall I? Let me explain. At half cock it's safe. But at full cock, a touch does it."

Billy learned the mechanism without speaking. Then he put the cartridges into their chambers and hid the weapon in the mattress beneath him.

"If I can't get it out when the time comes, you can," he said.

He breathed heavily for a while and looked at Geoffrey.

"I was wondering how you were going to clear yourself afterwards," he whispered. "How are you going to explain buying the revolver and bringing it to me and all that?"

"I've thought of the details."

"Devil doubt you. Where did you get the thing?"

"Don't you bother about it. That'll be all right."

"I know. But where?"

"At Colchester."

"Ah! Then you're not going to deny you bought it?"

"What's the good? Even if I'd gone to London for it, it's bound to be traced to me."

"And what are you going to say when I've pegged?"

"Only that you hoodwinked me, and — but what does it matter to you?"

"I want to know all there is to it. The thing is a bit of art, and though I shan't be here, I'd like to see how the story will look when it's finished. You've got your yarn complete, I'll bet, else I wouldn't have that thing hid in the mattress now. So how do you get out when Parkyn's dead?"

Seabrook considered, then he spoke.

"I'm going to say you told me of your sufferings, and that each hour you lived was pain. And I'm going to say you begged me to help you to end it; and that I put humanity before law and convention, and did as much for you as I would be done by — to shorten your trouble."

William grinned.

"You're a wonder," he said. "You're thrown away here. You ought to be helping the Kaiser. That lets you out all right. And there's your blameless record, too. Couldn't have done it better myself. You tell them you tried to get poison for me first, but I refused it and wanted this. Then you stand up for man's duty to his fellow-man, and lecture the coroner and say it's a shame that doctors only think of keeping the sick alive and never of helping 'em to die, and all that. For two pins I would shoot myself — now you've given me the tip. But don't you fear. It won't be till after I've bowled him over."

Seabrook confessed to some of his illogical confusion of thought already mentioned.

"When you wanted me to be here, I decided not at first, because I said to myself, 'What will Parkyn Ambrose think if he finds me here?' "

"What the devil does it matter what he thinks, seeing he won't go out of the room alive? "

"Exactly. I argued without that."

"They can't lock me up: they can't even try me. They can only stick a bobby at the door till I die. And if I was to turn round and tell the truth, that couldn't hurt you, for who would believe my word against your denial? But you've earned your thirty pieces of silver, and you're not the sort to fling 'em away, like Judas. You can give him points."

"Be careful about Emma."

"No need to tell me that. I wouldn't trust your promises to keep her out of the gutter, because a man who can do what you're doing don't set any value on his word to friend or foe; but t'other woman will look after Emma."

"You can feel very happy about her."

"Jezebel was here to-day. Brought some money, and told Emma that Parkyn had heard from the parson. She wouldn't see me — frightened of the sight of death. But she'll have to look death in the face before long. It'll be a shock to her. She'll want a lot of comforting — eh? "

He began suddenly to suffer.

"Call Emma," he said, and Seabrook obeyed. She ran up at once and gave him some medicine.

"I'm telling 'Moustache' I shall never see him again," whispered Billy.

"I shall remember the most remarkable and original man I ever met," said Seabrook. Then he turned to Emma.

"Don't you worry," he said. "And don't you think I've been seeing William for any reason to hurt him. We've only got to think of William now — his peace and

comfort; and we've got to lessen his sufferings all we can. And now his mind's at rest, because Mr. Ambrose is coming to see him; and I hope, after that, his body will be at rest, too. And that's the truest kindness we can do him. Remember what I say, Emma."

William echoed his last words.

"Remember what he says, Emma. A very good friend to me, he's been."

"And Mrs. Ambrose, too," said Emma. "And when you make it up with your brother, then you'll go without a shadow on you, Billy, dear."

"Did you read Helena my verses?" asked William.

"No."

"You let 'Moustache' see 'em some day. They'll make him die of laughing."

Then Seabrook left them and undertook his nocturnal tramp homeward. Once more, and once only, would he be called to visit Brightlingsea; but he did not desire to go again, and already began to consider if the final journey might be evaded. Only one thing caused him to hesitate: the fear that all might miscarry and William's purpose fail, if he were not there to aid and support him in the supreme moment. William was now exceedingly weak, and how if the thing he designed was perceived and anticipated by his brother?

On the other hand William was cunning, and his last energy and resolve were knit into this purpose. The actual deed seemed already done in Geoffrey's mind. It was his quality always to look far ahead, and already he saw the next problem and began to consider it. When Ambrose was gone, Helena must make the necessary appeal for Seabrook as one in her husband's confidence and essential to administration of "Colneside." No such confidence really existed, but she could assert it, and there was none to deny it. Exemption should follow, and, if necessary, be extended.

Helena, indeed, knew nothing of the widowhood that was rushing upon her; but her lover could trust the lady to be clay in his hands.

A whole chain of incidents awaited his control and development now, and he longed for the machine to move and the dirty work to be done, that he might find himself free to proceed with a manipulation of the future worthy of his genius.

CHAPTER XXXIII

HELENA VISITS AVELINE

HELENA AMBROSE devoted herself heart and soul to the business of saving Aveline. She enjoyed the task. As soon as she learned that her friend was at Brightlingsea, she hastened to see her and learn what might best be done to reconcile her with Peter Mistley.

"My feeling is," she said, "that whatever you've done, he'll have to forgive you, or he'll be cutting off his nose to spite his face. It'll pay him to forgive you."

They had met at Mr. Mushet's, and now walked through the country lanes on a grey afternoon while the wind blew and the leaves fell.

"You're looking very ill," said Helena. "Of course that's natural. I want to know what I can do; you owe it to me; I can't really help you if I don't understand. It isn't that I'm inquisitive; I'm only dying to be useful."

"Nobody can. It's up to him now. I wrote all I could think of to say. He was everything in the world to me after I'd known him six months, and I simply couldn't lose him, just for the accident of being married. It seemed so idiotic to let a piece of stupidity wreck our beautiful love for each other. I haven't heard from Peter yet. I thought he might have come down."

"What did you say to him?"

"I really forget. I wrote pages. But I told him exactly why I'd done it — just for fear of losing him and no other reason. You see it was a hundred to one against this happening. I had taken every possible precaution and, after all, the very thing I dreaded, and fought against, and was made to do gave me away. Your photo-

graph, Helena. My instinct screamed out against it. The same with the picture for the catalogue. I knew my husband would see that and recognise my painting, if I did it my way."

"Has Mr. Mortimer written?"

"Of course not."

"He's going to divorce you at once; that's one good thing."

"Billy says I'm a bigamist and ought to be locked up. How absurd the truth can be."

"Shall I see Peter for you?"

"Not for the world, Helena. If he doesn't write, or come, then I shall know what to do."

"What?"

"Why, vanish again. But I'm not afraid he'll be unsporting. I expect he'll just make some sort of arrangement, and reckon himself well out of it."

"If he really loves you, he'll marry you properly the first moment that he can."

"It's almost too good to be true. No, I'm very much afraid about it. For the moment I don't see how I could live without him."

"Did you tell him that?"

"Rather not. I've hurt him enough. I couldn't complicate the decision for him with silly threats. We were gloriously wedded, marriage or no marriage, and he knows it. And I always told him I hated marriage and attached no importance whatever to it. I did everything I could short of offering to be his mistress. And if I'd suggested that, no doubt he'd have felt I was on a lower plane and been appalled, and barred me for evermore. For that matter, of course, I am on a lower plane."

"Can Geoffrey do anything?"

"Good gracious, no."

"He is marvellously clever, and a great diplomat. He has got my husband to see poor William once more and forgive him."

"I'm sure that's just a thing Mr. Ambrose would have done in any case. Would he ever forgive Peter if Peter forgave me?"

"He doesn't blame Peter. He is frightfully sorry for him."

Aveline speculated.

"I wonder what on earth he'd do if he found out your romance, Helena?"

"You need never wonder what Parkyn would do: you always know. He would divorce me. I dare say it will come to that. I have felt fearfully reckless lately. The war corrects perspective, I think. You can only live your life once, and what on earth is the good of poisoning every hour of it with the need for pretence? To Geoffrey, who is so subtle, all our strategy and concealment and shame is amusement. He delights in difficulties and dangers, and makes them all come to nothing in his magical way. But I don't — not now. At first I did; now, as I get older, I hate all this humbug and lying. It spoils life. I want to be good, Aveline."

The other agreed.

"I expect you're wise," she said. "It's all right for you to feel that, because you're safe. I could endure being bad all right till I was bowled over. Being bad never bothered me. At the best possible Peter won't forgive me — not right away, not frankly and utterly. He might arrange a long-drawn forgiveness, in instalments. And the last would never be reached. I know how he's built. His heart will fight his reason, and his memory will take now one side, now the other. It's just a question which will conquer, and I believe it will be a sort of drawn battle, and the result a compromise — just the arrangement I always hate most in everything."

"What's the good of hating it? Life's a compromise. Everything we do amounts to a bargain, either with other people, or nature, or conscience."

"Life's a bargain, certainly," admitted Aveline, "and

few get the best of it, either. I thought I had, though."

"Probably you can't if you're made of fine stuff. The real high-minded people, those with grand ideals, can't possibly get any fun out of a world like this. They've only got to look round them with clear eyes to feel that as things are, they've no right to any comfort even, let alone pleasure and happiness. Why, even my conscience pricks me sometimes — a poor little conscience like mine; so we may well understand that any superior creature, with a real active conscience, can't make even a compromise with life, but must throw over all selfish thoughts and only live to plan to better the sorrowing world."

"As for throwing over happiness, it's happiness that throws us over. Who is ever happy for long, whether they're good or bad?"

"At a time like this, with all Europe in tears, nobody ought to be happy," declared Helena.

"I hate being unhappy. It makes me ill," answered the other.

Helena went back to tea with Aveline, and upon the way they called to learn how William fared. Emma would only leave him for a moment, and told them that he was worse and weaker.

"Always making up rhymes he is now," said Emma. "And they're mostly wicked."

"What'll she do, I wonder?" asked Mrs. Ambrose when they had left her.

"She won't want to go on living," declared Aveline. "Billy's everything that matters to her."

"I'm hoping my husband will do something for her — enough to keep her in comfort and decency. Emma has been a good friend to William, and done all she could for him in the fearful life he chose."

"I dare say Billy will ask him to remember her. He does care a great deal for Emma."

"Unhappiness everywhere," sighed Mrs. Ambrose. "Poor little Mrs. Mushet robbed of her boy. I never

thought I should live to be thankful I'm not a mother ; but I have."

With her last words the elder prophesied a happy issue to Aveline's troubles.

"I believe the very worst is over and that you'll hear to-morrow from Peter Mistley — something more or less comforting. After all, he's only human, and it takes a great deal to make a solid man like that stop loving one."

CHAPTER XXXIV

MADGE AT BRIGHTLINGSEA

FIRES ascended in the gardens of "Colneside" and mounds of rubbish were converted to char and ash, while the smoke clouds lazily rolled away on the western wind. The pageant of the year sank back to its dust again and returned to the earth that had created it. The day was one of dim light — sluggish, depressing. The gardens were sere, and their splendours had vanished.

Gregory Mushet, with Richard Bare, stood beside a bonfire and uneasily regarded half-a-dozen women, who worked in a row two hundred yards distant. Mr. Bare's cricket cap was the only bright spot upon that sad-coloured scene, for the flame of the fire hid under a mass of dead stuff and the girls were clad in black or drab.

"It brings home the war, don't it, to see females on the land?" asked Richard Bare.

"A very sad and crushing sight," murmured Gregory. "I've often asked myself of late how I'd feel if I found the women here; and now they are here. It makes you despair of Christ's Word and Teaching, to see women messing up the earth. No woman ever did any good in a garden — from Eve down."

"And worse even than that," declared Mr. Bare; "from all I hear the women are doing man's work something shameful throughout the whole country, and I read the Essex women were a lesson to the rest of the kingdom; for they'd come forth in their legions, and there's nothing they won't do; and seemingly very little they can't do; and if the Government was to order 'em into khaki, 'tis doubtful if there'd be a conscientious objector among 'em."

Gregory Mushet shook his head.

"They'll want half the glory of the war. They're always bitter quick to claim credit and bitter feared we men will forget their good deeds if they don't din 'em in our ears. And after all's done and the Germans are whipped back into their kennels and muzzled for a century of Sundays, please God, then the women will make out such a case for themselves that 'twill take all the wit of man to resist 'em."

"I've been watching 'em work," said Richard. "'Tis like a row of starlings for talk. If you want to get all they can do out of 'em, you'll have to spread 'em beyond mouthshot of each other in my opinion. They must be clacking."

They continued to do nothing themselves.

"You can see, from this distance, they don't take it in the right spirit," said Gregory. "Not one knows the hidden meaning of what she's doing, or why she's doing it; and you can bet your life they'll all be ill the minute the weather turns harsh."

"How's Lieutenant Hempson going on?" asked Bare.

"He's been mentioned in despatches," answered Mushet. "That's the first step forward, and if he's spared, he'll soon make his mark on the war. He's got the gifts and fears nothing."

"Your niece is uplifted, without a doubt."

"Yes; she's very pleased about it. She's heard from him and read me bits. It's a racking life; but in my experience only a certain amount of bad luck is measured out to every man. Hempson had his bad luck and I believe it's run out. In my poor nephew's case, the bad luck was a bullet in his young heart, and so his good luck is left for the next world. And a thing that often puzzles me, Richard, is exactly how it will be with them that have had all the plums in this life when it comes to hereafter. In justice, them as draw a blank here win a prize there; but how are you going to do with him that has good luck

with his health and his wife and his children and his money in this world, and dies full of honour at eighty-five or over, to leave a hundred thousand pounds in the bank and a marble statue to keep his memory green? Then, on the other side, there's such as my brother's boy, Teddy. All he had was hard work and to be crossed in love, for Margery was his dream; and then a fortnight of that hell yonder, and then death. And what does he go to? Mind, I'm not saying their lots won't be made equal; but I don't see how."

"More don't I," answered Richard Bare.

"Take our draughtsman, Peter Mistley. Bad luck has broke into his house like an armed man. These things can't be hid. He thought he'd married a widow, poor chap, and finds he ain't married at all, but have been living in fancied security all these months with a scarlet woman. She fled from him when the secret came out, and she's hiding for the moment with my people at Brittlesea. They don't know the awful truth, of course, else they wouldn't let their roof shelter her. But Mistley. There's his bad luck."

"Who knows?" asked Mr. Bare. "In fact, since he's found out, his luck mendeth, because to escape from the clutch of a bad woman is good luck."

"To escape from the clutch of any woman is good luck, for that matter," admitted Gregory. "You argue very well, Richard, and now you'd better mend your fires. Rain's coming. I must go and talk to they parlous women now. So sure as ever they reach to the end of a row, they waste five minutes straightening their backs before they bend to the next one."

Margery Mayhew came down the grey garden at this moment. She sought her uncle before going to the station.

"I'm just off to Brightlingsea," she said.

"And a word in your ear before you go, Madge. Don't you let on to Aunt Nancy about Andrew being men-

tioned in despatches. Good news like that would only fall cruel hard on your poor aunt's ear for the moment, with Teddy in his unknown grave. Comfort her so well as you can; and tell her the truth about that fallen woman. And don't you listen to no cunning excuses, or anything of that. She's a very bad lot, and the less you have to do with her the better pleased Andrew would be."

"He liked her, Uncle Greg."

"He was deceived. I never trusted her — too pleasant. They clever people, who always know how to get on your blind side and tickle your vanity or other weakness, are never to be trusted. They use their gifts treacherously. In fact, you can't be so charming as her, if you ain't a bit crooked, too. Straight people are never charming."

"She was a good friend to me — better than anybody knows but myself," answered Margery. "Anyway, I'm not going to cold-shoulder Aveline for anybody. She's worth a thousand of the everyday sort, and I shouldn't be here now and happy but for her."

"Well, don't you say I'm your side, because I'm not," warned Mr. Mushet. Then his niece left him and went on her way.

Aveline met her at the station, and though Margery stoutly vowed to herself that her friend could do no wrong, what she had done rather alarmed the younger woman and she felt in awe. That such things could happen at all astounded her. Her friend was changed, and to Margery's eyes had expanded and grown somewhat transfigured since the truth was out. She felt shy at first, and the diffidence which might have been expected in Aveline was manifested entirely by Madge. The latter assumed almost an apologetic mien, while her friend remained imperturbed.

But she acknowledged Margery's steadfast attitude.

"I knew you wouldn't give me up," she said. "I've done a very unusual sort of thing and it hasn't been

crowned with success, Madge; but I've thought it all out and threshed it all out to the last straw, and I'm quite convinced that if the time came again, I should do exactly the same. And now I'm bitterly sorry and very much crushed; but only for one thing, and that is because I didn't tell my Peter the truth. And now I've gone and made an earthquake of his life — and of my own."

"Don't talk about it if you'd rather not," said Margery.

"I must. You mustn't mind. I've got nothing else to talk about."

"Then talk about it. When I hadn't anything else to talk about but Andrew, you heard me patiently enough. If I could only be to you what you were to me."

"You would if you could."

"And Andrew's been mentioned in despatches. Don't tell my aunt. But I know you're glad."

"Yes, I am — very glad indeed, Madge."

"I had to tell you. Are you comfortable with Aunt Nancy?"

"Very. She's more than kind. I believe it is good for her to have me here for the minute."

"Does she know about it?"

"Yes, she does. I told her last night. I felt I must. Perhaps I wouldn't have told her if I had thought she would turn me out. But I knew her well enough by yesterday to feel she wouldn't do that. She took it like an angel, but doesn't hide the fact that I've got no more than I deserved. She hopes it will come right. But the question now is, what would 'coming right' amount to? He's coming to see me to-morrow."

"That's good news. If he's coming, then it's all right. If he had anything very terrible to say, he'd have written it."

"Just what he wouldn't. On the whole it's a bad sign that he's coming."

"Never!" declared Madge. "Do you think he'd trust

himself with you if he'd decided to — to go? He might make it easier for you by coming to speak, but what about him? If he's coming to see you, then you're safe."

"You're a darling to say so, Margery; but you don't know Peter. He's much greater than that. If he'd cared for the outside of me more than the inside, then there'd be hope; but he didn't. He always trusted in reason."

"Then he won't do anything unreasonable now," promised Madge.

"He won't; but man's reason isn't woman's. I'm groping in the dark. There's so much I don't know that may be influencing him. If I thought he was coming to me to decide about it, then I'd feel a 'mite of hope,' as Emma says; but he has decided. He'd feel after getting my letter that I'd nothing more to say, and he'd most likely think the letter was, like a man's letter, all carefully thought out before I sent it. He can't be expected to understand that a woman's letter is always different from a man's and always starts from a different place. I don't remember a word I wrote him now; and if I had to write again, no doubt it would be all different."

"His mind may not be made up. He may have suggestions to make and want to hear what you say about them. Don't think nothing depends on you, Aveline, because, if you think that, you won't fight. You must fight for yourself as never you did before."

"Did you fight when you wanted Andrew and believed he'd done with you?"

"That was different," said Margery. "I was a little fool; but you're clever and wonderful, and Mr. Mistlethwaite knows what it is to live with you. I believe if he once clearly understands that you can't live without him ——"

"You want to save me!" said Aveline. "You want to cry quits and find me sitting on the banks of the Colne waiting to ——"

"How can you, Aveline! Good heavens! What a

thing to say. I didn't mean *that* sort of not being able to live without him. You're not built like that."

"How do you know, Madge? But it's true. I couldn't kill myself — not for fear of death, but for love of life. Life is so worth while if you're not twenty-five. But there are other deaths than death. You can be stone dead, and perfectly alive at the same time."

"I don't believe for all your cleverness you've really grown up yet," answered the younger doubtfully. "I was grown up when I was seventeen. But some girls never grow up, and I believe you're one of them."

"Perhaps I shall kill myself all the same — if he won't forgive me."

"He'll forgive you, of course. What on earth's the good of not forgiving people? It doesn't hurt them and it may hurt you. He'll forgive you and take you back. I believe nine men out of ten would."

"So do I," answered Aveline; "but Peter's not nine men out of ten: he's one man out of a thousand."

"So much the more reason he should know what you're worth to him."

"You're a clever, comforting little dear. But it's all waste of time talking about it till I see him. And yet I believe I know perfectly well already what's going to happen."

"I implore you to fight for yourself, Aveline. Don't feel afterwards that you didn't do your best."

"I know his heart, but I don't know his head. Women are generally in that fix with men. We understand their hearts fairly easily, because it's our business, and Nature's built even the greatest fool of a woman to be clever at that; but they haven't all got hearts, and their heads are always beyond us, Madge. The best men rule themselves from there. I've seen the battle actually going on. Hang them! They 'sleep on' a thing! When Peter used to say, 'I'll sleep on it,' I knew it was all up. When a man sleeps on a thing, he generally smothers it in his

sleep. Their hearts are strongest at night — after dinner; but the wretches know their weak hours, and it isn't at night they decide anything that matters: they wait till the grey morning, when their hearts are locked up for the day."

Margery was secretly astonished that Aveline could be flippant at such a time.

"You're magnificently brave about it, anyway," she said; "and you couldn't be so brave, whatever you say, if you weren't fairly hopeful. And it's no good telling me that Mr. Mistle's heart won't come into this. If a man has got a heart at all, he'd use it over such a fearful thing. Can he forget all you've been to him?"

"No; and that may make it so much the harder to give me the benefit of the doubt. But you're right: love's quickened your wits, my dear, honest Margery. I am hopeful — with a dreary sort of hope. Hope with the salt left out. He's had a battle royal about it. I wanted to write again — miles more; but I didn't, because I thought very likely I'd contradict myself and give myself away. I've got a vague mind, Margery — like my father. He meant things when he wrote them; but life buffeted him — he was a feather in the wind of it. And there were always base outsiders ready to take advantage and score off him afterwards. Peter knows me well enough; but the fact that I'm Aveline can't alter the fact that he's Peter. He'll grant that I've got to be myself, but he can't escape from the need to be himself; and I know what he'll do, though he may not know himself yet."

"What'll he do, then? But don't say if you'd rather not."

"I'd rather not, because I might be wrong."

They came to the home of the Mushets and discussed Aveline no more. Margery had not seen her aunt since Teddy's death, and waited for Nancy to mention it. Then they talked of Teddy and a little cenotaph that was to be hung on the wall of Brightlingsea church to his memory.

“His father’s wishful so to do,” said Mrs. Mushet, “and there’s comfort in it for Samuel seemingly, but none for me. He’s buried in my heart, not in the trenches — that’s my comfort. He came from me and he’s come back to me. Mothers understand that; you girls that are not mothers wouldn’t understand it.”

“I do,” said Aveline. “A child feels it as well as the mother of the child.”

“A mother and her boy are one through time and eternity. One in two and two in one they are, and not life or death can change it. And he knows it. I’m an angel’s mother now, and that’s saving me.”

CHAPTER XXXV

THE PARTING

PETER MISTLEY and Parkyn Ambrose met by chance at Colchester railway station. They shook hands and spoke together, then found that they were travelling to the same place.

"I am going to see my brother, William Ambrose. He is now *in extremis*," said Parkyn.

"I am sorry to hear it."

"You are going to Brightlingsea, too?"

"Yes."

"Then a painful interview lies before us both," said the other. "Life brings these tragedies in its train. You said that you were sorry to know my brother, William, was *in extremis*. And yet you are mistaken to regret it, for the sooner he passes from these initial failures to another world, where he will begin again to learn his lesson and atone for years of uselessness, the better. For a life spoiled is merely so much time lost. William will be called to endure discipline—it may be terribly severe discipline—discipline that may occasion pain and grief to the undisciplined spirit. But the idea of eternal torment I have long since ceased to regard as reasonable. 'It is He that hath made us, and not we ourselves.' It follows, therefore, that eternal condemnation could only overtake a faulty soul with the sanction of the God of Mercy. I am bound to say this will not do."

Mistley, surprised at such breadth of vision, agreed with him, and they talked fitfully of the war.

Both relapsed into silence before they reached Brightlingsea, and while the younger looked out over the salt-

ings and marked the packing shed on Peewit Island, Mr. Ambrose sat with his hands on his knees and looked straight in front of him. From time to time he sighed and brushed the front of his waistcoat. There was nothing to brush, but he had a habit of doing so.

Aveline stood on the platform and both men saw her, while the train ran past her into the terminus.

She had not seen Peter and now, looking at the few who alighted from the train, still failed to mark him for a moment. Then he came and held out his hand to her and she saw that he was in khaki.

That event she had not anticipated, or thought upon. It staggered her. She started and gave him an opportunity to speak.

"You didn't expect me to be a soldier yet?"

"I might have; but I didn't."

"I'm in the Fourth Essex, stationed at Colchester for the moment."

He was quite serious, and had not smiled when he met her. He had taken the hand she had extended to his, but had shaken it as a stranger would. He looked thin and drawn to Aveline. Khaki made him seem smaller, and his moustache was not a military moustache. She felt he must do something to it. Such was her interest in his clothes and appearance that, for a moment, she almost forgot these things were outside her life.

"I think you ought ——" she began, in the old impetuous voice, then stopped and lowered her tone. "I forgot," she said. "Will you come to my rooms, Peter, or would you like to walk?"

"We'd better go to your rooms."

"I saw Mr. Ambrose leave the station and saw you talking to him. And yet — so extraordinary — I didn't realise it was you. I never thought you'd be in khaki, so of course a soldier didn't challenge my eye."

"He's come to see his brother."

"I saw him yesterday. The poor man wants to be for-

given. It's heart-rending to see such a clever creature all crushed and ruined and going out of the world without ever having done any good in it."

"You always said he was clever."

"I liked him somehow. I suppose he and I were wicked in rather the same way. Do they feed you properly at the barracks?"

He did not answer this. They passed a middle-aged officer and Mistley saluted him. He acknowledged the salute with his eyes on Aveline.

"A Royal Engineer," she said. "He lodges near the Mushets. He is very proud of his corps, and was telling Mr. Mushet about it. His sappers are all specially trained men, and have to pass a trade test before they can be sappers at all."

"In my line regiment we are clerks or ploughboys, as a rule."

"You're infantry, aren't you?"

"Yes, we're infantry."

"Surely the war will be over before you're all trained?"

"I don't know about all. Some learn quicker than others. Many of us are quite intelligent and will be ready to take our places in early spring. The fit, keen men who are worth sending, go out in drafts — fifty to a hundred at a time. So there's hope for us, if we work hard enough and learn our business."

"You want to go, then?"

"I do."

They came to Mrs. Mushet's and soon occupied Aveline's little parlour. He threw off his overcoat. Then he sat down and took off one of his puttees.

"Haven't quite got the hang of it yet," he said, starting to bind it on again.

"Can I do it?"

He shook his head.

"I needn't keep you long, Aveline; but of course one had to see you."

"May I speak first?"

"Say whatever you want to say. But really there's not much you can. The facts aren't in dispute, are they? No doubt you've realised what they mean by this time?"

"Well, I won't speak; then — you must speak."

"As far as I'm concerned it's summed up in one question, Why did you do it?"

"Because I loved you, and I knew if I told you the truth, you'd stop loving me."

"How could you possibly know any such thing?"

"We know lots of things, though we can't explain how we learned them. For instance, I know all you've come to say now before you say it. It's in your face, Peter. You see, I was bound to keep my secret from you, until I knew you quite well, just as I was bound to keep it from everybody else. And when we got beyond that, and I knew you loved me and you knew I loved you, then —— Look at it — how could I speak then?"

"Why not?"

"Because it would have been the end, and I should have lost everything in the world. Deal fairly with me, Peter. Ask yourself what you would have done on the day you asked me to marry you if I had then told you I was a runaway wife. Be quite honest: what would you have done?"

"Blamed you for hiding it, as I do now, bitterly."

"Yes, of course; but what would you have *done*?"

"I couldn't have gone through the farce of marrying you."

"But what would you have gone through? Do, before we part, think that out. It depends on what you would have done whether I was justified, or not, in what I did. Your judgment and sentence ought to hang on that."

"Can you really think it's possible to justify what you did?"

"In my own eyes, yes. Anything in the world was better than losing you by that time. Nothing mattered but

you, and I believed that if I'd told you the truth, you'd have banished me out of your sight for evermore. That's all I ask you to tell me: if I believed right or not. At least you know what you'd have done. I'll believe whatever you answer, Peter."

"There is no need to talk about possibilities that didn't arise," he said. "I haven't the slightest idea what I should have done. I should have felt the truth about yourself was the first thing you ought to have told me instead of the last. But spoken then ——"

"Yes?"

"Spoken then — when first we met, I mean — it wouldn't have made any difference to my loving you."

"But why should I be expected to give away my secret to you, before I knew whether I could trust you? Why should a woman always be supposed to tell her secrets and a man never be expected to tell any of his?"

"Don't muddle the issue, Aveline. I don't blame you for keeping your secret until the time I offered to marry you, or at any rate until the time we loved each other. But, after that, there was not a shadow of justification for doing so. It was an utter outrage, impossible if you had really loved me. And how I was likely to take it doesn't make any difference."

"Good heavens! Can't you see it made just all the difference?"

"You knew you could not marry me when I asked you."

"I never wanted to marry; but I couldn't say so then. It didn't seem to me to matter a button that the marriage was all humbug, because I knew we should be gloriously one, marriage or no marriage. I felt that some day I would tell you. It was acting a lie or losing you, that's how it seemed to me, and naturally a lie weighed nothing against losing you. And you've got to come back to the point, and tell me how you would have acted if you'd heard the truth, Peter. I have no case till I know that.

If you say it would have made no difference and you would have married me as soon as my husband heard that he could divorce me, then I'm done. For then I mistook you and was utterly wrong in every way. But if you say you would have dropped me on it, then I shall always think I was right to play for my own hand as I did; and the fact that I have lost won't ever make me believe I've played wrong. Do tackle that and try to think what you would have done, dear Peter. I know it's difficult after all the gorgeous times we've had together; but it's only fair to me. You see my future depends upon it. Of course you've done with me now, I expect that, but the vital thing to me — the thing that will decide if I can live and breathe naturally and respect myself again — is what you would have done if I'd told you the truth when you asked me to marry you."

"I see. And you, thinking you knew me perfectly, decided that if I heard the truth, I should turn my back on you, Aveline?"

She felt this unexpected retort, but parried it.

"You must answer me first — honestly, ever so honestly. You must answer me, Peter, and if I was wrong, then I can only call on the hills to cover me. No indictment you could bring would be half so terrible as my own."

"I'm sorry for you, then," he said after a pause. "Because I'll swear by any God you like to name, that if you had told me the truth about yourself — even so late as when I asked you to marry me — I should have taken the needful steps to make our marriage possible. You had only to say you loved me as dearly as I loved you, and I should have left no stone unturned until you were free. And as the law demands degradation before it grants freedom, I would have fallen in with its barbarisms and done all in my power to protect you against its insults. I'll go further than that, and say that if your husband had been one of the pious or malignant sort that wouldn't divorce you, that would have made no difference. I

should have asked you to come to me just the same, and revered you the more, and been the more punctilious and jealous for you and the readier to fight the whole world for you. That is how I should have felt and what I should have done, Aveline."

"Then no woman ever made a more hopeless mistake. I believe you, I believe every word you say, though every word's a nail in my coffin, Peter. I deserve to lose you — I can't say more than that. I never knew, or guessed, your love was so great, and I'm punished, Peter, with the usual punishment of ignorance. Nothing's ever punished like ignorance. Wickedness often escapes, but ignorance never does. And I was so ignorant that I couldn't see how big you were and never felt in my bones how much you loved me. I wasn't great enough for you to love me; I wasn't deep enough to hold all the love you poured out on me and wasted on me. There's only one thing I can ask you to do now, and that you'll easily do, because it's one of the qualities of greatness to do it always, and again and again if need be. Forgive me, Peter. Say you forgive me before you go. I can't live if you don't do that, and I won't. You're free again, and I haven't come between you and the things that mattered — I never did that, did I? I haven't poisoned your life, or anything like that; because you're too strong to be poisoned by me. So what I've done isn't beyond forgiveness. Love makes a woman distrust herself and shakes her judgment. My folly made me choose wrong before a fearfully difficult choice — difficult to a poor thing like me. But it was folly, Peter, not wickedness. I went wrong simply because I was blinded by the awful dread of losing you. But my love wasn't worthy of you. It was only the best I had to offer. I know now that I and my love were in a lower world altogether than you and your love. It's shattering, after our wonderful days together, so equal as they seemed and so beautifully balanced, to find what a gulf there was really. I suppose you knew it and felt it from the first,

but were too generous to let me have an inkling of it. I expect there are plenty of splendid, disappointed men throwing dust in women's eyes like that, and the fools don't know it. But now it's got to be known and felt, and the dust has to be washed out of my eyes with tears. And I ought to drown myself in tears. And perhaps when my little mind realises gradually all that this means, I shall. But you must forgive me — despite everything you must do that. Please, Peter."

She stopped and he did not answer immediately. He looked at her with unutterable sadness in his face; yet under it was something almost akin to a smile. He had not missed the little ironies of her speech, but knew they by no means altered the fact that she was in terrible earnest.

"How could you do it, Aveline?" he asked.

"Because I'm a low-down thing and was never properly lifted above myself when temptation came. And that's not my fault either, for who can be lifted above themselves and who can make what's shallow deep? But you took me as you found me, and you've got to forgive me as you find me. I don't know *how* I could do it, Peter; but I know why I did it. When I say I'm bitterly sorry, it means I'm bitterly sorry for being myself. And yet — and yet how can I be? It was myself you loved."

"You said in your letter ——" he began; but she stopped him.

"Don't waste precious time on that. It really doesn't matter what I said in my letter, does it? Not now that we're here together."

"You said in that letter you wouldn't influence me even if you could. Do you still feel that?"

She was impatient with the triviality.

"Don't waste time with rubbish that makes no difference. Of course I'd influence you if I could. I'd do everything but die, to influence you. I can't go on my knees to you to take me back, Peter; but I would do even that if I thought it could make you. No, I only ask you

to see how it looks from my angle of sight. Granted my angle of sight is the result of a squint. Most people do squint a little when they look at life. But the few lucky ones who see straight must be merciful to those who do not. And now I've spoken enough. I'm tired. I've talked myself empty. It's up to you, Peter. Would you like to smoke?"

He shook his head.

He sat still, bending forward with his hands locked between his open knees and his head lowered. He did not look at Aveline, but appeared to regard nothing but his boots.

She saw he was changed. Physically he looked thinner. His voice seemed to have a different quality. There was less light and shade about it, less care for inflection. He seemed dull — as though his mind were growing subdued to the colour of his clothes. But she knew that it was not soldiering that made him inert. She was under no delusion as to what he had felt for her, or how his life had changed at her touch. She began to be very sorry for him and to forget herself.

"Well may you ask me how I could do it," she said presently, finding he did not speak. "It was a damnable thing. I'm not going to try and excuse it any more. No man ever loved a woman better, or half as beautifully as you loved me. You trusted so finely; you believed in me so purely and perfectly. If I wasn't made of stone my heart would have broken — for your sake, not my sake. There's nothing too bad for me, or half bad enough. If I could atone by dying for you, I would; and I will atone somehow, somewhere. I was hoping you'd give me some idea of what to do — after you'd forgiven me. Penance comes after absolution, doesn't it? Or does it come first? I don't know."

"You're tiring yourself. You've told me all I want to know, Aveline. You've made a good enough case. When you say you had to be yourself, you say everything."

"No I don't — don't believe it — don't believe a word I say. I beggar the question when I say that. It's nonsense. Nobody's got to be themselves if they are under the guidance of a stronger nature than their own, and have given up their will and hope and everything to somebody else, as I gave up everything to you. I can't be excused. I knew how you loved me, and I ought to have known your love was big enough to stand the truth. Nobody would have understood the truth better than you."

"Yes, I should have understood it well enough."

"Then why didn't I know you would? I *did* know it. There's not an honest word to be said for me."

"It's no good going round in a circle. Have you got anything you want to say that you haven't said? If not, then I'll speak."

"No, there's only to be forgiven before you go, Peter. And if you could point some sort of a road for me, it would be something. The road would lead away from you, I know; still, if you'd pointed to it, I could travel it easier."

"Why should you saddle me with the need to choose for you?" he said moodily.

"No shadow of reason. Merely an impertinence. Still, if you can forgive me ——"

"I can't forgive you," he said. "Honestly, Aveline, at this moment I'm not forgiving you. Can't you see what an utter wreck you've made of our lives? A thing never to be built up again. It's no more possible to forgive you than it would be to forget you. And I don't want to forgive you either. I'm in a very curious state of mind, and it's still more curious that I can try to describe it to you. But I feel it's a jolly sight better for us both that I hate you like hell for doing this to me, than that I should forgive you for doing it. Does that sound mad to you?"

"No; I understand. Forgiveness is a dead thing and hate is alive," she answered, her mind moving like a flash. "I was a fool to ask you to forgive me, because forgive-

ness is so often just a door slammed and locked between people. But hate's different. It may end in death or in life; but it can't stop. You can graft on it. It's not a passionless, frozen thing like forgiveness. It's a storm that may end in earthquake or turn into — you never know. Yes, I'd rather you hated me than forgave me, Peter."

"You understand. What don't you understand? I can't explain, but I suppose your explanation is right."

He got up abruptly.

"I'm going to volunteer with the first draft possible for France. I'm thinking of nothing but soldiering now. I try to keep everything else out of my head. Afterwards — God knows. I don't well see how we can keep apart. We're not two people — we're one."

"Go on hating me and I'll go on loving you, and see who holds out longest."

"I can't be clear," he said, weakening a little. "Don't use that word for it, Aveline, though there's no other."

"I know, I know. It isn't hate, it's the smart of wounds — wicked wounds, given you by your own second self. Only give me a chance some day to heal your wounds. I don't ask more from you than that. I'm wicked, but I'm strong. I'll turn my wickedness into goodness. I'll work — not at art. I'll do something that counts."

"You'll be a free woman when I come back," said Peter. "He's going through with it as soon as possible. There may be a lot of wretched little details — legal, I mean. But that can't be helped."

"They don't matter."

"Well, if I get through — I suppose we — And in the meantime see Dr. Carbonell. He's going to look after things. You'll be all right."

"You're not much of a hater. Wait — only wait till you come back. There are some things I can do."

"Good-bye."

"May I write to you?"

"Please."

"Will you write to me?"

"Yes."

"Will you see me just once more before you go to France?"

"What do you think about it?"

"All right — then we won't, Peter. But tell me before you go. And read my letters. I'll soon be doing something useful."

"Work — work your fingers to the bone. Try and kill yourself with work."

He hardened up again and she was glad.

"Now I'll be gone, Aveline."

"Thank you for coming. It was like you. Very few men would have done it. If I'd worked my fingers to the bone sooner ——"

"We've neither of us known what work means yet. It's worth while learning."

He picked up his cap and coat, hesitated, and then rose and prepared to leave her quickly. That, too, she understood, and was glad he did not touch her again.

"Good-bye. You'll come back to something better than you're leaving."

He turned an instant at the door.

"This all seems so damned canting and superior on my side. I didn't mean to be like this; but you understand. Let me go and fight and I shall be clean again."

"And I, too," she said.

"Take — take care of yourself, Aveline. Don't work too hard, of course."

Then he left her, and she restrained the longing to lift her arms to him and kept them down.

It was the compromise she had expected; yet it was better than she expected. He had forgiven her, but did not know it.

When his footsteps sounded no more a vivid emotion

swept her — the greatest thing she had felt in her life. A luxuriance of noble resolutions blossomed in her heart. Her imagination was equal to this.

“My God, I’ll do something big!” she said, while the tears ran.

Then she shivered and sat down and felt her body grow small and her soul shrink in it.

“I *can’t* do anything big,” she cried to herself; “I can only hunger to.”

CHAPTER XXXVI

MURDER

PARKYN AMBROSE, composing his mind to the painful scene that awaited him, sought the home of Tom Darcy and prepared to take leave of his brother.

A recent incident troubled him slightly, though he doubted not there existed some explanation. Calling to speak with Seabrook that morning in the draughtsman's room at "Colneside," he learned that Geoffrey was not at the studio. But the young man never took holiday without asking if he might do so. Therefore Parkyn wondered whither Geoffrey had gone. He was now to learn. From the upper chamber where Billy lay, two persons saw his brother approach. They were Emma and Seabrook, and the woman announced their visitor.

"He's coming!" she said. "He's looking at the numbers. He's got a big grey coat on, and a stovepipe hat and his umbrella."

She looked at Seabrook.

"He'll want to see Billy alone, for certain," she added.

"William wishes me to stop for a few minutes. Then I shall come down," explained Geoffrey.

"Let him in and bring him up," he added, as the door-knocker fell. He had taken command.

"Shall I make a dish of tea for the man, while he's along with Billy, or won't he drink it?"

"By all means make it."

Emma went downstairs and Seabrook turned to William. He was very weak and could only speak under his breath. But he had conserved his senses for this moment.

"Get it out," he whispered, "and pull to full cock. I'll

keep it under the bedclothes. I ain't going to waste time talking."

Seabrook brought the revolver from its hiding-place, cocked it and put it into Billy's hands.

"Don't touch the trigger till you fire," he said. "I'll light the candles, it's getting dusk."

The other was sitting up with his knees lifted. Under the clothes he held the revolver. The footfall of Mr. Ambrose sounded upon the stairs, and his big, slow voice addressed Emma.

"You should put a light upon the landing. It would enable you to go up and down more safely."

"I know the way so well I don't need no candle," said Emma.

She threw open the door.

"Here's Mr. Parkyn Ambrose come to see you, Billy, dear," she said. "And he'll do the talking—don't you try."

Parkyn came forward to the bedside and Seabrook signalled to Emma to leave them. She sank away and shut the door behind her.

William had greatly changed since last his brother saw him. He was now grown to a skeleton, and his thin beard failed to hide the staring cheek bones or yellow cheeks. His forehead seemed to bulge out over his nose, which had lost its ruddiness and grown pointed. His eyes were sunk, his mouth was open and his breathing had become difficult. He continually lifted his shoulders. He regarded Parkyn without emotion and made no effort to take the hand he held out.

"Too weak," he whispered. "I can only listen. I can't speak."

Then the candles burned up and showed Geoffrey Seabrook. Until now Parkyn had been merely conscious of another man in the room, and supposed he was the doctor. Only when Geoffrey spoke did Mr. Ambrose realise with astonishment the third person present.

"Good powers! You here, Seabrook?" he asked.

"You'll naturally feel astonishment, sir. I had not time to ask leave, for the urgent message came from Miss Darcy while I was having breakfast. But I knew in the circumstances you'd raise no difficulty. Mr. William urgently wished me to be here."

"Why does he want you?"

"Speak to him and he'll tell you."

"It is not a time, nor do I speak for any other ear than his."

"Exactly what I told him." He turned to the sick man. "You see, Mr. William ——"

Billy was not listening, but intent on his own thoughts. His hand moved under the bedclothes.

Parkyn spoke.

"There can be no reason why Mr. Seabrook should stay with us at present, William. Our meeting is sacred. By God's mercy you have been won to make your peace with Him, and I have come to say that you have made your peace with me, too. We are all learners here, and few learn the best way to face this difficult life, William; but in the world to come ——"

He broke off suddenly. He was conscious that Seabrook had not departed and it annoyed him. But the man stood his ground obstinately.

"May I ask you to go?" he said, and Geoffrey, who stood on the right of William's pillow, while his master sat on a chair on the left of it, did not answer, but looked at William.

It seemed as though this challenge was the signal.

The sufferer knit himself together and concentrated every energy. In a moment he had produced the revolver and without delay lifted it, pointed it, aimed and fired. His actions were almost simultaneous, and so near was the muzzle of the weapon to the victim that the man's coat was set on fire. He fell in a heap, writhing, burning and still living. The explosion shook the crockery, and

the smoke nearly choked William Ambrose. But it was not his brother that he had slain. He had shot Seabrook under the heart and now looked down at him and laughed.

The murdered man lived long enough to realise the situation and Billy was glad. "Think of it — think of it!" he whispered as loudly as he could. "All gone — all wasted. Your cleverness and your plots and your devilries. And me, your tool, turned in your hand and cut you to the bone! Cleverer than you — deeper than you, I was! Wriggle away; you won't wriggle that out of your heart."

Until this moment Parkyn Ambrose had been too appalled to speak, or move. Now he leapt to Geoffrey's aid as Emma rushed in. But neither could save him. Consciousness was out. He bled from the mouth and died as they held him.

The earthquake — the only thing he ever feared — had happened to him.

"D'you want to know why I did it? Because I didn't like him. Give me something to drink, Emma. Leave messing about with him. He's dead. He wasn't a nice man. Blood's thicker than water, that's true — look at it. Mop it up, Emma, or it'll get through the ceiling. I forgive you all you've thought against me, Parkyn. I forgive you — for your wife's sake. This carrion wasn't a gentleman. I had a down on him, because he thought he was cleverer than me. Drink, Emma — get me drink. Take it away — I don't want it again."

Parkyn took the revolver from him and put it on the mantelshelf. He was shaking and trembling. Emma suddenly fell into violent hysterics and began screaming loudly. William, quite indifferent, stared at them both, and at the dead man lying face upwards on the floor.

His interest was there.

"He didn't think this was going to happen to him, you know, brother Parkyn. He had different ideas altogether. Never mind what they were now. His death was

the surprise of his life, anyway. A clever chap; but not so clever as me — clumsy compared to me. Don't you bury us too near together. But I'll make him look silly in hell presently — as I've made him look silly on earth. I'll tell the devils about him. Just cast your eye over him — a bloody fool, eh? That's all he is. Yesterday tingling in every nerve and brimming over with hopes and tricks and plans to get a good life — full of pleasure and free of pain, and now useless clay, with everything lost. Shut your mouth, Emma; what are you screaming about? Was you in love with the brute, too?"

Parkyn felt his self-control leaving him before this scene. It seemed clear that Billy was insane. He felt the situation beyond his power to control, and he hastened, hatless, from the house and summoned aid. He returned with two policemen after sending messages for the doctors.

When he came back Emma had recovered; but she would not be taken from William.

"I'd like to tell you all about that muck there," said Billy to the police, "but I can't; there's other people in it, so you'll never hear how wicked he was, nor yet how clever I was. A masterpiece if it were known, and greatly to my credit. It may get me into heaven, Parkyn. But you mustn't hear the story, my old bird — nobody must. You'll have to wait for the next world. Take it away, policemen. A gentleman's bedroom is no place for that lump of dirt."

An inspector followed the police and they removed the dead to the floor beneath until a doctor should see him. Billy, who had made Emma give him liquor, was now drunk. He jeered at the corpse as they carried it away, and presently sank into a condition that seemed half sleep, half death.

His brother made a full statement to the police, but was unable to advance any reasons or explanation of the things that he had witnessed. He could only suppose William insane. Mr. Ambrose grew very faint himself before

the end of the ordeal, and the doctor when he arrived first tended him.

They looked to Emma to furnish some evidence of the significance of what had happened. But she could not.

"I don't know nothing," she said, "and he's said he's not going to tell you about it, so if I knew, I wouldn't tell neither. And I pray God you don't take me away from him. He can't be moved, and you'll only hasten his end and do no use if you take me away."

Satisfied that Mr. Ambrose need not be doubted, and prepared to accept his word for the facts, the police permitted the shattered master of "Colneside" to return home. His brother they desired to arrest; but two doctors were now present, and as both declared it impossible to move William, a policeman stopped beside him and spent the night watches with Emma and Thomas Darcy.

CHAPTER XXXVII

HELENA

HELENA AMBROSE concealed her agony and displayed fortitude that amazed herself. But the luxury of grief was demanded by her nature; she desired to dwell in every chapter again, before the book of her past was closed for ever; and since there was now only one in the world who could be expected to know what Seabrook's death must mean to her, she sought that one and wrote to Aveline.

"To-day they are burying him — my bright, beautiful Geoffrey," she wrote. "It is all a fearful mystery and will remain one. My life is ended, Aveline, and I shall never believe in a merciful God again. I cannot even weep in peace. There is nobody to share my desolation. My husband, too, is a good deal broken. To see a man slain within a yard of you and to be the brother of a murderer —— But of course the creature was a lunatic. Not one word of explanation would he give. When one thinks of my ceaseless kindness to him and the senselessness of this dastardly crime, one can only see madness in it. Please arrange to come with me for a little change to Bournemouth. I must get away from here, or I shall certainly go mad and do something dreadful. It is fearfully hard to hide all that I am feeling."

She proceeded in this strain for several pages and Aveline feeling sympathy enough, agreed to go. She wrote back on the day of William's death and recorded it.

At Seabrook's funeral in Colchester a congregation of curiosity filled the churchyard; but the brother of Parkyn Ambrose was buried at Brightlingsea and few stood at his grave. Aveline went with Emma and waited beside

her while the pit was filled. Tom Darcy accompanied them.

"My master-bit is took from me," said Emma, who wore a black dress. "I don't know what I shall do, but garden on his grave. I won't go very far away — never from Brittlesea."

"Mr. Ambrose didn't come to the funeral?"

"No, he was fairly fed up with my Billy. He came down once more after that fearful thing; but William never spoke again. They'll always say he died mad, of course; but you and me know he done it for his brother's honour. But for Parkyn's sake and that Helena's sake he wouldn't tell, and so he goes to his grave in disgrace instead of dying a hero. And I'm going to work day and night till I've scratched the money for a proper marble tomb. There's nobody can prevent me putting it up, is there?"

The day was wet, and as the women walked back from the churchyard Aveline perceived a black stain trickling down the face of Emma.

"Oo! Have it run? 'Tis my turkey feather. I dipped it in the ink, so as it should be like all the rest of me, black — black. I had to wear it. Something called to me to wear it, 'Grey Eyes.' He'd have fancied a stranger woman was walking behind him if I hadn't wore it."

A week later Aveline joined Helena Ambrose at Bournemouth, and in the seclusion of a private lodging the elder lady gave way to grief. She built up an imaginary Geoffrey and soon began to create a myth for her comfort. She found, to Aveline's astonishment, a growing measure of consolation in religion, and withdrew her indictment of the Everlasting after they had been at Bournemouth a week.

Helena considered her friend also. She expressed thankfulness to know that Peter Mistley had not abandoned her.

"He couldn't," she said. "You did wrong for nothing but love. It's about the only thing we poor women ever do wrong for, I believe. I shall never blame you — never."

"I'm going into a hospital," said the other. "I want to work as I've never worked before. For good reasons, too — for good reasons, Helena. And also because it will make the time seem shorter."

"Where is he now?"

"In a training camp. He feels the same about work, and welcomes the physical toil of the army and living with a crowd and everything."

"Geoffrey was facing it too. His dear, beautiful hands were never meant — But I mustn't think of things like that. I keep him before me now as a spirit — a wise spirit that knows how wrong we —"

"Wrong!" cried Aveline. "Do you mean to say you've come to that?"

"I'm coming to it," confessed Helena. "I shall come to it. There's nothing else left for me to come to — no peace, or hope, or excuse for living any more unless I do. We've both been blind in different ways; but these awful things were sent — they were sent to save us. I'm going to work too — really work with my hands. There are trials before me. I shall very likely hurt my husband; but it will be a matter of conscience now."

"What on earth are you talking about, Helena?"

"It doesn't matter for the present. I'm awakening. I feel it more every day, something new — a dawn. I am young in well-doing yet, God forgive me for it, but I must try and make up for lost time. I yearn to get peace through suffering."

Life moved with Aveline, and she learned that Mistley had left his affairs in her control. Her husband divorced her and, on visiting Dr. Carbonell, she heard that Mistley's home was to be given up and his possessions stored, after she had taken all that she wanted. It was understood that

she would find hospital work for the duration of the war. The old doctor was gentle and cheerful.

"The keen men are getting drafted out after four months' training," he said, "and Peter is as keen as any. He will probably be going to France about February."

She was startled at this.

"So soon? I must see him again before he goes. You must make him see me again before he goes. Please, Dr. Carbonell. The idea was we shouldn't; but I can't stand that."

"Leave it to him. He'll know what you feel about it. Men get a few days with their friends before they go — if they want them."

"He may not want them," she said. "Don't tell him what I've told you. Promise. Let him decide."

A week later Aveline was at work. Helena sometimes came to her hospital with flowers. They met for a few minutes near Christmas time, in the leisure hour that Aveline enjoyed, and during their talk she noticed that her friend was now wearing a little silver cross and the oval medal of a religious confraternity. Still she studied her attire, but there was a suggestion of mouse-colour about her, as though she were emerging timidly from mourning.

"And so I am," declared Helena when Aveline suggested it. "That's just what your quick sense would appreciate, my darling. There are great changes going on in me and I'm suffering for them, and I'm glad I'm suffering for them."

"You're getting religious," said Aveline.

"The comfort! Oh, the unspeakable comfort! Slowly it seemed to dawn over me and warm my frozen heart. It began at Bournemouth at that Anglican service we went to. One had missed half the real help and warmth and light and consolation in our chilly Protestant surroundings at Mersea. I never guessed what I was losing."

"The candles, and incense, and going to church before breakfast," suggested Aveline.

"Not that exactly; but the symbolism, the precious, vital symbolism. Such a revelation. The Stations and so on — like spring coming over the winter of my heart. Symbolism is my very food now. I hunger for it."

She put her hand on her bosom and her little medal jangled against the cross.

"You've been joining things," said Aveline.

"Beautiful things! I can't tell you what a difference it's making. The seed was there. I had the yearning often — for something, I knew not what. And now God has led me to it. And I look back as though the past was all a dream — so unreal you know — and I have woke up to the reality that underlies everything."

"Lucky woman!" said Aveline.

"There's bitter in the sweet, of course."

"You can't forget?"

"Not so much that. I can't forget, but I don't mourn — for *him* — only for myself. We erred, because we were in the dark; we ——"

"Are you *sorry*?" asked Aveline, round-eyed.

"To say I'm sorry is far too small a word. I feel as the Magdalene felt. And that makes me very sure my Master will not judge me very hardly. Real love is always forgiven. I loved much, Aveline, and much will be pardoned me; and I know that, behind the veil, poor, mistaken Geoffrey is learning just what I am learning here. It was high time he began to learn, and he could not learn in this wretched life, so he had to go to the next and learn there. He is not called to suffer as I am suffering. And I am glad to suffer. I love to suffer — I feed on suffering. I have splendid fortitude."

"What's left to hurt you if you are so pleased with yourself?" asked Aveline rather coldly.

"My husband. He's martyring me, and I welcome the pangs. He's low church, you know — in the depths — unspeakably puritan. I never realised, or cared before, of course, and it didn't matter to me if religion, as he

understood it, was dead or alive; but now religion is my life, I can't palter with it any more, Aveline. I go to confession. I told Parkyn so and it utterly upset him."

"Confession, Helena! What on earth have you confessed — not ——?"

"No, Aveline. For myself, I care nothing. If you have reached to what I have reached now, you're absolutely selfless. But there was another to consider. It seemed a sort of treachery to the dead. There are some things we should only tell to God and trust to God. At least that's how I feel. But Parkyn is fearfully unhappy — most unreasonable. Of course, I can't change now. I must be true to the new light. I can only go on and endure and hope he'll be helped to understand. That's the worst of his rather stuffy Christianity. God forbid I should say it's only a form; but I can't make him see this in the real Christian spirit. His charity, when it comes to the test, is nothing worth. Charity begins at home, and yet he would deny me the consolations I have found."

"What's his objection?"

"Utterly vague and senseless when you come to the point. He talks of 'toying with Rome' and 'graven images.' It's so stupid, really. Can't an intelligent person see the gulf that separates symbolism and graven images? His church is as bare as a barn. Not a single symbol for the aching heart to rest upon — the aching eye, I mean. Nothing to feed the hungry. I'm going to be free and open as the daylight henceforth, Aveline. There are some people who wear these symbols under their clothes, because they are cowards. I show my good works — at least I'm going to. I'm going to fight and be recognised as a fighter. 'Every one knows what you seem; few know what you are' — Machiavelli, or some such person, said that. Let people know what you are, if you want your conscience to be at rest."

"How perfectly wonderful!" said Aveline.

"Don't sneer, please," answered the other with a hint

of acerbity. "Some are led by harsh paths and some by easy ones. I have been led by a thorny and cruel road; you've had your way smoothed out for you and been extraordinarily lucky from a worldly standpoint. But that's no reason why you should ——"

"Oh, Helena, I wasn't sneering; I'm much too surprised to sneer. It *is* wonderful. It's a conversion, isn't it? And conversion is always wonderful."

"To people who are not converted it may be," answered Mrs. Ambrose; "but not to those who are. I'm not pretending to be a saint, Aveline. But I do say this: you've got to be a sinner before you can be a saint. I cling to that. People like Parkyn can't be saints, just because they are outside the possibility of sinning. No sinners, no saints. I'm sure that's so."

"Poor Billy said something like that about Mr. Ambrose."

"When I know more, I shall tell you more," declared Helena. "I'm a child in these things as yet — just learning, reading, kneeling in secret for hours with an open heart."

"You're looking younger — less anxious."

"Because I'm being myself. I'm not seeming; I'm not hiding anything. It's the same with you. You needn't hide anything any more. What a relief it is. Some women love secrets — just for the sake of having them. I never did. How do you get on with your work?"

"All right; but a good many women here won't know me."

"You must expect that. That's your cross. My cross is branded, as it were, inside me. Nobody knows how it burns. Your cross has got to be borne openly. We've each got our own secret Red Cross, besides the one you're wearing on your sleeve. I glory in mine."

"I don't glory in mine at all," said Aveline. "I was wicked to Peter; I wasn't wicked to these women."

"My dear, that's no argument. You were wicked to everybody when you were wicked to Peter."

"Were you wicked to everybody when you loved poor Geoffrey Scabrook?"

"Yes — in a way; but there's a good deal of difference in the cases really. To deceive where you love, as you did — But we need not talk of the past now. We are forgiven. This world looks so different after one's eyes have been washed with tears; and so does the next. In fact, you can only see the next through tears — but I'm keeping you."

"I must go. I'm ever so glad you're happier, Helena. You know that."

They kissed and prepared to part.

"This all seems crude to you, no doubt," said Helena; "that's because you only see the results, and have not shared the slow successive stages that produced them. Ages of spiritual experience have passed over me in the last two months. The danger is that one may become dry, and find the light ceasing to warm one. Spiritual dryness is a most trying thing — a sort of Nemesis for spiritual pride, I believe; but, thank God, I haven't felt it yet."

She babbled herself off — the contented, unconscious vehicle of a dammed sensuality that had broken loose in the terms of religious revival.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

BILLY'S POEM

AVELINE saw Peter Mistley before he went to France. She had declined any part in his worldly interests or share in his soldier's pay. She explained that it would be more agreeable to her to feel free in every respect until he returned. Asked whether she had money enough, she assured him that she had. There were no calls upon her at the hospital.

They met without endearment. Peter was a sergeant now and declared interest in his new profession. He looked hard and well. Something soldierly had come into his manners; something of discipline and promptitude into hers. They hid their hearts from each other. Four months of hard work had made Mistley ready for all that might await him. He spent most of his leave at the gardens with Mr. Ambrose, and found time to finish two works that Geoffrey Seabrook had left unfinished.

"One feels the firm ground slipping in these troublous times," said the master of "Colneside." "Or rather," he added, "only faith and staunch trust in the ultimate triumph of right prevent one from feeling so. I'm bound to say one needs one's faith and is daily more thankful to find it stablished on a rock. There is an instinct abroad in the human heart, that only through simple and childlike trust in the Almighty can we hope to weather this onset of the Powers of Evil. And that trust is awakening in the most unexpected quarters. I hear that in Parliament an increasing number of the members attend prayers. Our representatives begin to feel that there is an increasing need for God's light on their operations."

"There is — without a shadow of doubt," admitted Peter.

"We are all being tried in the furnace," continued Mr. Ambrose, "and some are melting, and others, as I say, are inspired to seek the only way of escape and ultimate triumph. One does not always approve of the means of salvation sought, and one heartily dislikes the approach to God through channels of the eye and through appeal to other emotional and untrustworthy elements of our nature, peculiarly susceptible to unwholesome stimulus just now. But, apart from certain cases, unfortunately under my personal observation at present, the trend is to the good. As for you, I shall regard it as a personal blessing when you are able to return to me. God be with you in your ordeal and strengthen your arm against the foe."

So Peter went to France, and Aveline found that he had left her direction with the authority and that all official news of him was to come to her in the name of Mrs. Peter Mistley. A curt official postcard came with certain particulars.

"You have been noted as next of kin," it said. "If this soldier is reported wounded, admitted to hospital, etc., you will be informed at once. This will be done before the fact is published in the newspapers."

The communication moved her more than anything that had happened to her until she received it. It brought the tremendous truth of the situation to her heart and remained like a load thereon henceforth.

There came a little interlude in her strenuous life, and she attended a wedding — two months after Peter had gone to France. Lieutenant Andrew Hempson returned home on leave and married Margery Mayhew before he left England again. Hempson had found an excuse for existence. He proved a fine soldier and his qualities won swift recognition. The little ceremony was made bright by the flash of swords, and through a naked glitter overhead, came Margery from her nuptials. Mr. Gregory

Mushet gave her away, and the wedding guests included his brother Samuel from Brightlingsea, and Nancy.

"Can you trust yourself to come, my old dear?" the engineer of the *Peewit* had asked his wife; and Nancy answered —

"Why not? He'll be glad enough to know that Madge is going to be happy."

Aveline clutched at the little hour and was happy to see the girl's joy. Indeed she felt joyful, too. At Margery's entreaty she attended the wedding lunch in "Fair View Villa," and spoke awhile with Nancy Mushet. But Gregory avoided her, and was uneasy that she should be there.

"Her Red Cross dress saves her," he said to his brother; "but she's a bad character, and I don't like her in my residence, and she knows it."

The sun shone for Margery, and a wintry gleam warmed Aveline's heart as she returned to her hospital. The work of the wards grated against every instinct and was torture to her temperament. But she did it to the best of her power. She had received brief letters from Peter telling her that he was well, and she had written many times to him, and sent him certain things that she had seen advertised as valuable for the fighting men. She was expecting another letter, and when she returned to the hospital it awaited her.

A telegram also awaited her.

Mistley had fallen.

Not until long afterwards did she read his letter. It thanked her for the gifts and declared them very useful.

"I shall be glad to come back to you, Aveline," he concluded.

.
She broke down upon her sorrows and was invalided. Helena desired to take her away, but Helena's ministrations were vain, and presently Aveline thought upon

Nancy Mushet and went to Brightlingsea. She had become very silent, and here her silence was respected.

She was built to suffer sharp agonies, but not the long-drawn, unwithering grief that profounder natures endure. She dwelt with Peter in the past and her memory took her through every scene and painted every image of him — from the first by the lily pond at "Colneside" to their final parting on Colchester railway station. Centuries ago the story seemed to begin, yet all told it was short of a year. She distracted her mind by dwelling on the tiniest details of their swiftly growing intimacy. She comforted herself by remembering that she brightened a part of his life. But that brief sunshine had only served to make the final storm-clouds darker. Was he very sorry to die? She knew not. Then she suffered from remorse — an instinct that she had always scoffed and flouted and declared impossible to her. That she could feel it told her new things about herself she had never guessed.

She watched Nancy Mushet, and saw that religion was rounding the edges of her sorrow, and faith had served greatly to lessen it. Nancy had reached a stage when she could generalise. There were glimpses of poetry in her; she shared the world's grief and was no longer suffocated by her own.

"Death's only picking flowers now," said Nancy once, standing in her little garden beside Aveline. "He lets the ripe fruit and grain go by and only plucks the young flowers. Snatches them with both hands and leaves the old stocks that nourished them. But the scent of the flowers clings to the gardens still."

"Curse death," said Aveline. "It is far better not to have been born than to have to die."

The older woman took her hand gently.

"There is no death for anything that matters," she answered. "What we call death is only putting out the light when we go to sleep. We, who know the sun's going

to rise and wake us up again presently, don't curse the dark, but welcome it."

Aveline could not sleep, and she took long walks to weary herself, choosing dreary ways and finding the flat brown earth and the wild skies of March chime with her spirit. She was tramping along a road outside Brightlingsea one evening and turned to look at the sun going down over the elms of Mersea. The estuary blazed; and she saw the *Peewit* on her way home from the packing sheds. The little steamer looked very black on the tide-way, for sunset flooded the water with light.

In a field close to her half-a-dozen amorphous lumps moved in a row. They were women returning from their work and as they approached her, Aveline saw Emma Darcy among them. They had met once recently for a few moments and arranged to meet again. Now they walked side by side back to Brightlingsea and talked together.

"Goodstruth, it hurts your back above a bit; but it's welcome hurt to me," said Emma. "If your body's aching, your heart can't. I nilly fainted two days ago; but I don't care. That Helena wants for me to work in a hospital, but I'm a out-of-doors creature. Billy would rather I was here."

"Time's the only thing, Emma."

"Ah, you're young yet. The young can trust Time to mend their troubles; but us, middling to old, know Time's thrown us over."

"You want to be young to feel all a man or woman can feel."

"It's the distance from death that makes the young smart most," explained Emma. "They've got such cruel far ways to go before they creep to the peace of the grave, and the road looks so terrible long. And that's how you feel now; but you'll be a mark on living again, and enjoying life too, some day."

"My life's finished just as much as yours is," declared

Aveline. "What's left will be a dream: the reality's dead — just as dead as he is. I sneered at the world for trying to tone down death, as it has been lately. It seemed mean and disloyal to life; but now I know better, Emma. We must tone it down, to keep ourselves from going mad. We don't love life as much as we did before the war, because it's much less lovable to most of us."

"The war's nothing to me. It ain't the war, but the emptiness of everything now Billy's gone," said Emma.

"Empty — yes. Every breath one breathes is empty. If we had to work to breathe, many of us would stop, feeling it not worth while."

"I'm a good bit torn in half," confessed Emma, "and I catch myself wishing a thousand times a day that William was here to tell me what line I ought to take. I'm terrible drawn to go to church, and yet can't be sure if it would be false to him if I went."

"If it would comfort you, I should go."

"Do you go?"

"No; it wouldn't comfort me. I haven't forgiven God yet."

"Oo!" said Emma, "if that isn't like William. But he did forgive God. Would you like to see the rhymes he made up when he was dying? Wicked, you might say, yet wonderful comforting to me. Not to my brother — he's on to me to burn 'em, because he says they are blasphemy, and might get me locked up if they was seen by a Justice; but I say it's no more blasphemous than Billy's killing of that bad man was murder. He was a great hero to do it, and still greater never to let on why he done it. His brother little knows what he's got to thank Billy for."

"Helena's like you: she's taken to church, Emma."

"If you don't, I shan't: you're cleverer than me."

"It's how you're built. I hope you'll go. What did Billy write before he died?"

Emma dived into her bosom and produced a dirty envelope.

"Thank God I've got penmanship and could set it all down from his lips," she said. "It's a bit mad, you might say; but it's William, and I'd keep it and fight the Justices for it because of the last verse. And the last verse is gospel true, 'Grey Eyes,' and I couldn't go on all alone if I didn't know it was true."

She unfolded a sheet of foolscap.

"I've pasted it on a old handkercher," she said, "for I oped and unoped it so oft that it began to fall to pieces. He was always making up verses when he was dying — he'd wake me up in the middle of the night sometimes to write one down. And many I tore up, because they were rude. After the end of it, when he killed that poor wretch, he didn't make up no more poetry. He said nobody could make up poetry with a policeman always in the room. A song he called it."

Aveline read the man's doggerel —

"I do not know what lies behind the face of the old moon;
But this I know, if there's a pub, I'll call there very soon.

I do not know who was the bloke who stole my best umbrella;
But this I know, despite the theft, he may be a good feller.

I do not know when He made me, poor God Almighty's whim;
But since He did His faulty best, I freely pardon Him.

What Em will do when I am dead, I really cannot tell;
But this I know, she'll nose me out in heaven or in hell.

We'll tramp the golden streets, or else the cinders and the pitch.
So long as we're together, it don't matter a damn which."

"There's a mite of comfort in it somehow, 'Grey Eyes,'" explained Emma, folding up her treasure.

"I dare say there is."

"Of course we shan't tramp no more, nor nothing of that. But he believed that we should meet again; he often said he'd be terrible bored till I came to him."

"I'm sure he will."

"He'll be changed; but I hope not too much changed."

"I hope not. It would spoil him to change him too much, Emma."

"And you?" asked the elder. "I'm forgetting your great sorrows. For sure your man felt like what Billy felt and hoped he'd see you again. I knew what I'd got to face and was prepared for it; you didn't."

"Yes, I did; I was prepared for it, too. I only had a ghost of a hope from the first, Emma. I don't think he wanted to come back very much."

"Goodstruth! How can you say that?"

"It isn't strange. I ruined his dream of me. And that wrecked his life. He must have known, if he ever really came back, that it would take ages before he could trust me, or respect me any more. And no doubt he felt the game wasn't worth the candle."

"You oughtn't to say that, and him not here to deny it. Lucky you're so young, for you'll have more than fifty years to see it different. And if he's happy, then 'tis your place to be content. And if you could only feel, same as I do, that you're going back to him ——"

"Never, never, never. Death's death, and all we're saying about it now is a sleeping draught to soothe our own misery. Only our own secret hearts know whether Death's a friend or an enemy, and he'll be my enemy always."

"I wonder now what you'll make of life, when you're three tens old," said Emma.

THE END

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